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# The Princeton Theological Review

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THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

that the light of God's truth may shine bright and increase

WINTER 2000

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# The Princeton Theological Review

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# The Far Side of Hell

A few years ago I received a desktop calendar of Far Side cartoons by Gary Larson. They were arranged topically, so my wife and I went through a couple months of bizarre cow conversations, followed by a few weeks of aliens waxing philosophic, followed by animals impersonating gangsters, and so on. For one peculiar month, however, we peered through a window into Gary Larson's odd visions of hell. True to his comic method, Larson took what was "known" about hell, then juxtaposed it beside his twisted "unknown" innovations, with the result that I would either burst into laughter or furrow my brows and say, "man that guy is weird." Imagine, for instance, two of hell's prisoners sitting on a bench, flames shooting up at either side, each with a cup of coffee. Avoiding the ears of the trident-wielding demonic guard in the flaming cloak, the one chap mutters under his breath to the other, "man, they thought of everything, the coffee's even cold."

While I am normally put off by supercilious modern cartoonists toying with doctrine, Larson's wit usually diffuses my ire. More striking in Larson's case is what he chose as the "known" from which to spring-board into his wacky reflections. It is an entirely unoriginal, stereotypical notion. All the things that annoy you most gathered into one eternal environment, with an overlay of pointy-eared gothic characters and flames everywhere. Of course Larson was not trying to be original here, but therein lies the rub. The point of contact he made with culture, what he assumed everyone would "know" about hell, was just this dribble. When he wanted to be original, he diverted from this view.

Larson's cartoons serve as a poignant reminder that Christian thought on hell has not advanced, at least as far as the general culture is aware, beyond the stereotypical myths of the dread monks of the middle ages. This is not to say that Christian thinkers should have as their sole aim the drive to be "original". On the contrary, it is usually when scholars try to be "original" that they end up completely irrelevant. Rather, thoughtful Christians must hold on to the conviction that continued conversation with inherited truth will yield ever new—but always consistent—insights about God and his revelation. Harnessing those insights and presenting them in a way that will influence the hearts and minds of the present generation is the church's perennial challenge.

Sadly, had Gary Larson attended most mainline seminaries -- including Princeton -- his understanding of hell likely would not have progressed beyond what we find in his cartoons. Hell would still be an arcane myth from the past to be played with, not an element of salvation to be worked out with fear and trembling. In my classes on Bible, church history, and theology combined, I can recall only one lecture in which hell was given due attention, and you would think that a crusty conservative like myself would have found the appropriate courses, had they been offered (the single lecture, which George Hunsinger delivered while visiting a theology course, was thankfully a very fine one, and is reprinted in this journal).

We hope that this issue of *The Princeton Theological Review* will offer no fodder for stereotypes or mythologies. While committed to the orthodox tradition of the church and the revelation of the Bible, we trust that none of the articles in this issue will appeal to those who would pigeon-hole these convictions as narrowly judgmental or vindictive. All have been chosen for their earnest theological reflection, combined with a sensitivity for the inherent difficulties in considering how God's love and judgment bear on our understanding of hell. A common confession from the contributors to this issue admits that the church has misused this doctrine throughout its history, but nevertheless, this misuse cannot nullify its inherent truth.

The faithful reader of the PTR will note that we do not include a sermon in this issue. Our apologies, but we ask for clemency, since a good sermon on hell is hard to find these days. Note, however, that Tim Keller's attentive article has plenty of seasoned advice on how to preach on hell, with excerpts from his own attempts. But if you know of a good sermon, please bring it to our attention, and we'll do our best to rectify the situation.

This issue is also the first which we devote to a single topic. We hope to continue this format in upcoming issues. Our contribution to theological education and the life of the church is to create a journal in which students, professors and pastors all wrestle with the same questions together. This forum, we trust, will go far to bridge the gap between the academy and the parish, for the strength and faithfulness of God's church.

MATTHEW KOENIG

# Hellfire and Damnation: Four Ancient and Modern Views

by George Hunsinger

As chronicled by D. P. Walker, hell has been in steady decline as a doctrine since the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> By 1985 Martin Marty, the church historian, could quip that “hell disappeared but nobody noticed.”<sup>2</sup> In 1991, however, a national news magazine announced that in popular belief hell was making a “sober comeback.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in a somewhat surprising development, a number of strong defenders have recently arisen from among the ranks of the philosophers more than of the theologians.<sup>4</sup>

According to Wolfhart Pannenberg, the distinguished theologian, in the West the church history of the twenty-first century is likely to be written, not by so-called mainline Protestantism, but by Roman Catholicism and by the resurgent conservatism of the Protestant church.<sup>5</sup> The outlook for the more liberal churches is not bright. The mainline is fast becoming the sideline, and the sideline seems destined for oblivion. Interestingly, the more ascendant churches are precisely those in which a traditional belief in hell has always held a secure, if not completely undisputed, place. The time seems ripe for a survey of the traditional belief and of its competitors within historic Christianity.

Four different perspectives on hell will be examined by taking both ancient and modern authorities into account. Augustine will be paired with two recent writers who uphold the traditional belief, then Origen will be paired with J. A. T. Robinson, Arnobius with John R. W. Stott, and finally Maximus the Confessor with Karl Barth. These are among the most powerful advocates for the main options as taught and contested within historic Christian belief.

## *Eternal Punishment: The Catholic Faith*

No one has had a stronger influence on Christian beliefs about hell than Augustine (354-430), the bishop of Hippo and great theologian of the church. The lines of biblical interpretation and rational argument that he developed have formed the basis of the catholic faith on this topic ever since he set them forth. Views such as those that he championed made their way into the so-called Athanasian Creed (ca. 381-428), which proclaimed: “At [Jesus Christ’s] coming all human beings shall rise with their bodies and . . . those who have done evil will go into everlasting fire.” Essentially the same position was officially adopted at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215: “Those [the rejected] will receive a perpetual punishment with the devil.” This belief has been normative not only for the Roman Catholic Church, but also for the confessional standards of the Protestant Reformation as instructed by Luther and Calvin. Today the contours of Augustine’s position appear essentially unchanged in the arguments of Roman Catholic theologians like Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger<sup>6</sup> and conservative-evangelical Protes-

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George Hunsinger is the Director for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary. This article originally appeared in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 51: no.4, 1998. It will also be included in Dr. Hunsinger’s collection of essays on Barth’s theology, *Disruptive Grace*, forthcoming from Eerdmans’s. The article has been edited for length.

tant thinkers like J. I. Packer.<sup>7</sup> Modified versions of the Augustinian view are also present in contemporary discussion.

The definition that Augustine gave to the doctrine of hell can be analyzed into seven basic components. Although many of these components were of course present in Christian belief prior to his time, Augustine systematized and defended them in an unprecedented way. The result was what we may call “the strong view of hell.”<sup>8</sup> Analyzing this view will provide us with a useful yardstick against which alternative or competing views within the Christian tradition can be measured and understood. The seven components of the strong, Augustinian view are as follows.

First, hell is actual. Not all human beings are saved. Those who are not saved are consigned to eternal damnation. “What true Christian,” wrote Augustine, “does not believe in the punishment of the wicked?” (Enchridion, VIII).<sup>9</sup> No other future for such people is open: “Their eternal damnation is a matter of certainty” (Enchr., XCII). “For as a matter of fact,” Augustine stated, “not all, nor even a majority, are saved” (Enchr., XCVII). Hell, as Augustine understood it, is no mere theoretical possibility. It is the eternal destiny that awaits the majority of the human race.

Second, hell is severe. No greater torment can be suffered than the anguish of those in hell. Their torment is a “supreme unhappiness” (City of God, XX, 2),<sup>10</sup> and a destiny that could not be more horrible. “It is the worst of all evils” (CofG, XIII, 11). The “torments of the lost” will be “perpetual,” said Augustine, and “unintermittent” (Enchr., CXII). He explained: “To be lost out of the kingdom of God, to be an exile from the life of God, to have no share in that great goodness which God has laid up for those who fear him, and has wrought for those who trust in him, would be a punishment so great, that, supposing it to be eternal, no torments that we know of, continued through as many ages as the human imagination can conceive, could be compared with it” (Enchr., CXII). As Augustine noted, it is Jesus himself whom the Gospels depict as uttering the most severe warnings about eternal torment. “Who could fail to be appalled,” Augustine exclaimed, by “... this vehement emphasis on that punishment, uttered from his divine lips?” (CofG, XXI, 9).

Later tradition would come to distinguish between “negative pain” or the “pain of loss” (poena damni) and “positive pain” or the “pain of affliction” (poena sensus). This distinction was already implicit in Augustine. The pain of loss, he believed, arises from the loss of God. The damned have forfeit the great goodness for which they were created. They are for ever alienated from life with God, having no communion with him. For this reason

such persons also endure the second sort of pain at the same time, the pain of affliction. The intensity of their torment stands in direct proportion to the greatness of the good they have lost. Vivid biblical imagery of eternal fire, of weeping and gnashing of teeth, of the worm that does not die, and so on, conveyed the intensity of this loss.

Third, hell is endless. Those who endure it never perish, and their torment affords no escape. Because they are “not permitted to die,” it can be said that for them “death itself dies not” (Enchr., XCII). They persist in a kind of “second death” wherein “pain without intermission afflicts the soul and never comes to an end” (Enchr., CXII). The soul “no longer derives its life from God” (CofG, XIII, 3), and yet it survives in a death without death. It is a misery in which those who endure it “will never be living, never dead, but dying for all eternity” (CofG, XIII, 11). It is a state of “everlasting wretchedness” with no possible exit (CofG, XIX, 28). The lost are flung into an eternal fire “where they will be tortured for ever and ever” (CofG, XXI, 23).

Fourth, hell is penal. It is the penalty for sin as appointed by God. Since the remedy for sin is faith in Jesus Christ, hell is the penalty for those who lack this faith. It is undoubtedly a form of retribution rather than a form of remedy. It is not meant to lead to repentance or amendment of life, because the time for repentance has passed. “Punishments are a means of purification only to those who are disciplined and corrected by them,” Augustine noted (CofG, XXI, 14). The penalty of eternal damnation, as meted out at the Last Judgment, obviously falls into a different category. It is not at all meant to improve the life of those on whom it is inflicted. As “eternal chastisement,” it is inflicted exclusively “in retribution for sins” (CofG, XXI, 14).

Fifth, hell is just. It is the punishment that corresponds to the offense. No other punishment would be adequate to the wickedness of sin against God. Who but a fool, wrote Augustine, would think otherwise? “Who but a fool would think that God was unrighteous, either in inflicting penal justice on those who had earned it, or in extending mercy to the unworthy?” (Enchr., XCVIII). Being himself the very standard of justice, God could not possibly do something that is unjust (regardless of whether we can comprehend it or not). The human being “who does not obtain mercy finds, not iniquity, but justice, there being no iniquity with God” (Enchr., XCVIII). Whoever is condemned has absolutely nothing to complain of “but his own demerit” (Enchr., XCIX). “Whatever the wicked freely do through blind and unbridled lust,” explained Augustine, “and whatever they suffer against their will in the way of open pun-

ishment — this all clearly pertains to the just wrath of God" (Enchr., XXVII). Here as elsewhere "God commits no sin," and certainly not by inflicting the punishment on the wicked that they deserve (CofG, XXI, 14). For "if not a single member of the race had been redeemed, no one could justly have questioned the justice of God" (Enchr., XCVIX). Therefore, no one has grounds to complain when "the greater number who are unredeemed" are consigned "in their just condemnation to what the whole race deserved" (Enchr., XCVIX).

Sixth, hell is ordained by God. It is not merely an impersonal consequence of sin. Nor is it merely something that sinners suffer as a consequence of misusing their freedom. It is God who consigns sinners to eternal death by denying them eternal salvation. "Assuredly there was no injustice in God's not willing that they should be saved," wrote Augustine,

"though they could have been saved had he so willed it"

(Enchr., XCV). God always acts strictly according to his own good pleasure. He does not will anything that he does not carry out. Human obstinacy can never hinder God,

who is omnipotent, "from doing what he pleased" (Enchr., XCV). We must not suppose that hell represents a defeat for God "as if the will of God had been overcome by the will of human beings" (Enchr., XCVII). Indeed it would be at

once foolish and blasphemous

to say "that God cannot change the evil wills of human beings, whichever, whenever, and wheresoever he chooses, and direct them to what is good" (Enchr., XCVIII). "For it is grace alone that separates the redeemed from the lost" (Enchr., XCIX).

If God chooses to convert evil persons, he demonstrates his mercy. If he chooses not to do so, he demonstrates his justice. For God is a God who has mercy on whom he will have mercy, and who hardens whomever he will harden (Rom. 9:14) (Enchr., XCVIII).

"No one is saved," Augustine explained, "unless God wills his salvation;" and if God so wills it, "it must necessarily be accomplished" (Enchr., CIII).

Conversely, no one is damned unless God so wills it according to his perfect justice.

Finally, hell is inscrutable. The inner logic of God's dealings with sinful human beings is beyond our capacity to fathom. How it can be fair for God to save some but not others when all are equally sinful is inscrutable. How the severity of endless torment from

eternity to all eternity is commensurate with the actual offense of human sin is also beyond human ken. Our only recourse in such matters is to defer to the greater wisdom of God. "What we have neither had experience of through our bodily senses, nor have been able to reach through intellect," explained Augustine, "must undoubtedly be believed on the testimony of those witnesses by whom the Scriptures, justly called divine, were written" (Enchr., IV). It is on the basis of scriptural authority, not on that of rational intelligibility, that the catholic faith finally rests with respect to its teaching about eternal punishment. Many things that are obscure in this life will be made clear in the life to come. In particular, the fairness of God's not willing that the majority of the human race should be saved — "though they could have been saved had he so willed it" — is for now a matter of faith, but "then shall be seen in the clearest light of wisdom"

(Enchr., XCV; cf. CofG, XX, 2; XX, 20).

In the meantime the important thing is not to doubt that God does well when he exercises his judgment, whether in mercy or in condemnation. "For if a man does not understand these matters, who is he that he should reply against God?" (Rom. 9: 20) (Enchr., XCIX).

As already noted, Augustine's articulation here of the catholic faith has remained definitive to the present day. In this light, two

more points are worthy of note. First, in its understanding of the New Testament witness, the Augustinian tradition always assigns pride of place to Matt. 25: 31-46 (cf. Enchr., LXIX, CXII; CofG, XX, 5; XX, 9; etc.). This is the passage in which the Son of Man returns in glory for the Last Judgment. All the nations are gathered before him and separated into the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. The former go away to eternal life and the latter to eternal punishment. The perfect parallelism of the two destinies — both being described as 'eternal' in the same sense — presents a difficult crux of interpretation for any view that would depart from the Augustinian tradition. Whether the passage from Matt. 25 really deserves the hermeneutical primacy that tradition has assigned to it, however, remains a matter of dispute.<sup>11</sup>

Second, modern exponents of this tradition often depart from Augustine on a very interesting question. As Henri Blocher points out: "Among the modern, the most popular argument — the very soul for

most apologies for the possibility of hell — refers to human freedom. Since the nineteenth century, one notices a systematic effort at discharging God from the responsibility of punishment.”<sup>12</sup> Modern interpreters, in other words (including official or quasi-official representatives like Ratzinger and Packer), typically adopt an apologetic strategy that places them at significant variance with two of Augustine’s main points: hell as divinely ordained and hell as inscrutable. In modern apologies hell is supposed to seem less inscrutable when human responsibility is nudged into the spotlight while divine judgment is quietly escorted to the shadows. Divine sovereignty is thus displaced by human “freedom;” and the frailty of human understanding, by would-be claims to “intelligibility.” Rarely do Augustine’s modern heirs pause to ask themselves whether the gains of this strategy really outweigh the losses, or indeed whether the strategy really works at all.

*Universal Salvation: The Minority Report*

If the official faith has its champion in Augustine, the best known unauthorized alternative finds its ancient defender in Origen (ca. 185-254), the brilliant Alexandrian thinker who is aptly described, if not as the first “systematic theologian,” then at least as “the first fully professional thinker” in the history of the church.<sup>13</sup> Origen developed a kind of “Christian Platonism” that sometimes seemed more Platonist than Christian, and this mixed outlook displayed itself nicely in his arguments for universal salvation. His views on this matter, of course, did always not find a welcome reception. Apokatastasis, or the final restoration of all things — a view associated with Origen’s name — was explicitly condemned by a Council at Constantinople in 543, and possibly also by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553), though the latter condemnation remains uncertain and doubtful. Nevertheless, if we take the categories used to analyze Augustine and apply them to Origen, we obtain the

following results. Origen and Augustine agree that hell is actual and just, but Origen denies that it is endless. This disagreement then modifies the other four points. The Origenist hell is less severe than the Augustinian. It is penal but not in the same sense. Although divinely ordained it allots greater scope than Augustine did to human freedom. And it is finally less inscrutable than the Augustinian version would require.

For Origen as for Augustine, hell is actual. Everyone must indeed pass through divine judgment as through a purifying fire or “flaming sword.”<sup>14</sup> The purifying fire is God himself: “God, the Fire, consumes human sins. He crushes, devours, and purifies them.”<sup>15</sup>

Although the fire will be at once fearful yet also purifying and gracious, Barth deliberately ventures no suggestion about what the final result for unbelievers will be. He states only that everyone will somehow be released from ‘the contradiction in which they now exist,’ and that somehow every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The form that this confession and release will finally take for unbelievers is left open.

toward the sinner is thus by no means vindictive; “it has a corrective purpose” (Contra Celsum, IV, 72).<sup>17</sup> God does not inflict punishment except as “the means by which certain souls are purified by torment” (CC, VI, 26).

Remedial punishment clearly implies, in many of Origen’s remarks, that the torment will not last for ever, and that all human beings will finally be saved. “There is a resurrection of the dead,” wrote Origen, “and there is punishment, but not everlasting. For when the body is punished, the soul is gradually purified, and so is restored to its ancient rank” (FP, II, 10). “All things” will finally be “restored — through God’s

goodness, through their subjection to Christ, and through their unity with the Holy Spirit — to one end, which is like the beginning" (FP, I, 6). "The goodness of God through Christ will restore his entire creation to one end, even his enemies being conquered and subdued" (FP, I, 6). However, until that time, declared Origen: "My Savior weeps for my sins. My Savior cannot rejoice while I remain in iniquity."<sup>18</sup> The very sorrow of the Savior shows that "God always wants to make good that which is wrong" (CC, IV, 69). "For the Almighty nothing is impossible, nor is anything beyond the reach of cure by its Maker" (FP, III, 6). God will never cease his work for salvation until all resistance to his will is overcome.

In his account of salvation Origen has to address the perennial question of how divine grace and human freedom are related. In his most typical remarks he does not seem to assign the same kind of sovereignty to divine grace as did Augustine. The picture is complicated, however, and we do not need resolve it here beyond sketching out some broad outlines. Although Origen sees grace as an indispensable aid, he seems to view it as significantly dependent upon the work of human striving, even when it is finally decisive. At one point he imagines a sail-ship that is navigated by sailors and driven by the wind. The navigation is like human freedom while the wind is like divine grace. Each "cooperates" with the other. If we use our freedom properly and well, God will always assist us with benevolence. "Our perfection does not come to pass without our doing anything, and yet it is not completed as a result of our efforts, but God performs the greater part of it" (FP, III, 1). Throughout the longer or shorter — and sometimes perhaps incalculably long — period of purgation, purification and torment through which our souls must pass on the way to final salvation, our efforts are fully summoned and engaged. "But we believe that at some time the Logos will have overcome the entire rational nature, and will have remodelled every soul to his own perfection, when each individual, simply by the exercise of his freedom, will choose what the Logos wills, and will be in that state which he has chosen" (CC, VIII, 72). A balance seems to be struck, as Origen sees it, between unflagging grace and recalcitrant freedom until the latter finally yields to the former.

The end of all things, as Origen conceived it, is their return to the perfect harmony of the beginning. This metaphysical return seems more nearly Platonic than Christian in inspiration. It involves a difficult scheme of pre-existent souls acquiring earthly bodies only as a result of the fall into sin and then living in various states of disorder and disarray until finally rescued through trials of purgation and

grace after death. It is not always easy to determine how much influence the great metaphysical parabola of descent and ascent is exercising on Origen's thoughts. It is perhaps in the background of his allegorizing exegesis of Scripture, however, which allows him to read New Testament passages about eternal punishment in a much freer way than did Augustine, who worked so unflinchingly with the literal sense. Allegorizing exegesis and metaphysical scheme, however, do not fully explain what is perhaps finally Origen's most salient difference from Augustine on the question of eternal damnation: his granting of unqualified primacy to the benevolence and mercy of God. Though Origen's God is not without his own inscrutability, it is not the inscrutability of an apparently malignant caprice.

A recent argument for universal salvation that owes something to Origen — especially in his more evangelical voice — can be found in the writings of J. A.

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T. Robinson, the New Testament scholar, popular Christian writer, and Bishop of Woolwich. If one is looking for an uninhibited proponent of universal salvation, Robinson leaves nothing to be desired. Yet his arguments are not always easy to decipher. Too often they seem to hesitate, if one may put it this way, between biblicalism and existentialism with a fuzziness that defeats the willing reader. Apparently straightforward appeals to biblical texts are placed side by side with "existentialist" reinterpretations of biblical "myths." Why some texts are myths while others reveal objective states of affairs is never explained. As a working hypothesis, I will assume that Robinson feels secure in his belief in the old liberal triad of "God, freedom and immortality." Beyond that he holds (at least residually) beliefs about the saving work of Jesus Christ that appear to be more traditional than his espousals of myth

would allow. Although in his more dispirited mood Robinson offers little more than existentialism spiked with the emotions of Christianity,<sup>19</sup> he also has a more confident mood as well. At least some of his arguments for universalism happily give evidence of the latter.

“Freedom” is a theme that Robinson assumes he can develop without any serious reference to the problem of sin. Freedom is just something that we have, an inviolable, sacred potency that even God had better respect exactly as it stands. It is as pristine a source of autonomy for Robinson as any Enlightenment philosopher could hope to conjure up. “God,” Robinson assures us, “has as much interest in the preservation of our freedom as ever we have ourselves” (IEG, 121). Therefore, any solution to the problem of eternal destiny “which in any way compromises the fact of freedom stands self-condemned” (IEG, 120). The God so solicitous of our freedom will always work through “a gentle leading” (IEG, 122), a policy statement that might have surprised

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any number of biblical figures — like Jacob at Peniel, like Joseph at the hands of his brothers, like the money changers driven from the Temple by Jesus, or like Paul blinded on the road to Damascus, to say nothing of whole armies like the Egyptians drowned at the Red Sea, or indeed of Jesus himself hanging from the cross. Nevertheless, if allowances are made for a certain unfortunate sentimentality, what Robinson seems to be aiming at is somehow reminiscent of Origen. “May we not imagine a love so strong that ultimately no one will be able to restrain himself from free and grateful surrender?” (IEG, 122). For Robinson as for Origen, God will use his “infinite love” in such a way as finally to “conquer those last shreds of our pride and independence” (IEG, 124).

“Immortality” is not a word that Robinson greatly prefers, but he does affirm an afterlife. This he understands in terms of “resurrection,” an idea that he develops in an admirably biblical sense inso-

far as he upholds a sophisticated, realist understanding of its “bodily” character (IEG, 89-109). Unlike either Augustine or Origen, however, Robinson proposes a version of divine judgment that seems attenuated at best. The idea of hell as something actual is supposed to have existentialist significance (adding zest to our decisions), but none for the afterlife (IEG, 128-9). The real severity of life without God is a theme that has vanished almost without a trace, involving neither the pain of loss nor the pain of affliction. Sin, as mentioned, is an idea that is conspicuous mostly by its absence; therefore, it can hardly be seen as the object of divine penalty, whether retributive or remedial. God himself, being nothing if not meek and mild, begins to take on the visage of a well-meaning and perhaps rather bumbling Anglican cleric. Too often Robinson leaves himself wide open to the withering assessment of H. Richard Niebuhr: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”<sup>20</sup>

And yet Robinson would scarcely be worth considering if Niebuhr could have the last word. As a matter of fact, by what seems to be a happy inconsistency, Robinson by no means leaves us with “a Christ without a cross.” Although the cross is not developed as a theme when Robinson discusses universal salvation, he clearly presupposes not only that it is the supreme manifestation of God’s love, but also that it somehow involves Christ’s having died for our sake and in our place (IEG, 133). It is the event of the cross that makes all the difference in Robinson’s case for universal salvation. The cross, one notes with interest, is not allegorized through an existentialist slight of hand. It is presented as the definitive manifestation and the real enactment of a divine love in which the world has been reconciled to God (IEG, 139-40).

Robinson’s cross-centered case for universal salvation rests on three main points. First, there is an appeal to reality. “The New Testament asserts the final apokatastasis,” writes Robinson, “the restoration of all things, not as a daring speculation, nor as a possibility, but as a reality — a reality that shall be and must be, because it already is. It already is, because it is grounded in what has been, the decisive act of God, once and for all, embracing every creature” (IEG, 110). The real person and work of Jesus Christ, as centered in his saving death, is the decisive act by which God has already reconciled all things to himself. Universal salvation will be the necessary consequence of the cross.

Second, there is an appeal to how God’s justice is related to God’s love. God’s justice cannot be understood, Robinson urges, in the traditional, Augustinian sense. It cannot be understood as something

over against and independent of God's love. "God's justice," Robinson explains, "is always the sternness of his love" (IEG, 117). "It is nothing other than love being itself, love in the face of evil, continuing to exercise its own peculiar power" (IEG, 116). Since God's justice works only through God's love, it is impossible that his justice should ever manifest itself in conflict with his love. But that very conflict, in effect, is precisely what the traditional, Augustinian view leaves us with when it affirms the justice of eternal torment in the face of the divine love.

Finally, there is an appeal to God's nature as revealed by the centrality of the cross. Robinson writes: "Christ, in Origen's old words, remains on the Cross so long as one sinner remains in hell. That is not speculation: it is a statement grounded in the very necessity of God's nature. In a universe of love there can be no chamber of horrors, no hell for any which does not at

*It is not always easy to determine how much influence the great metaphysical parabola of descent and ascent is exercising on Origen's thoughts. It is perhaps in the background of his allegorizing exegesis of Scripture, however, which allows him to read New Testament passages about eternal punishment in a much freer way than did Augustine, who worked so unflinchingly with the literal sense.*

the same time make it hell for God. He cannot endure that, for that would be the final mockery of his nature. And he will not" (IEG, 133). The God we see in Christ could not be the willing supervisor of an eternal torment without entering into self-contradiction and thereby simply ceasing to be God (IEG, 118).

Robinson's cross-centered arguments help to clarify what is at stake between the Augustinian and Origenist traditions taken at their best. What is at stake, one might say, are two different views about how to interpret Scripture. The Augustinians hug close to the shoreline, so to speak, whereas the Origenists launch much further out to sea. The Augustinians accuse the universalists of overlooking too much prominent timber when sighting the main-

land, whereas the Origenists accuse the retributionists of not seeing the forest for the trees. The Augustinians would say that the forest is fraught with inscrutability; the Origenists, that any inscrutability is overridden by intelligible significance. The Augustinians would point to the rank undergrowth of sin in its great obduracy and abomination; the Origenists, to the towering peaks of divine love. The Augustinians would insist that faith must arise in this life as the necessary condition of deliverance; the Origenists would retort that the sufficient condition of deliverance is found in the assured persistence of divine grace. The debate, taken as a whole, arguably results in an impasse. Whether this impasse can be resolved is the theme to which we now turn.

#### *Annihilationism: Retribution Tempered by Clemency*

One effort to resolve the impasse is called annihilationism. This proposal is perhaps best understood as a cautious modification of the traditional Augustinian view. It agrees with the official tradition on every point but one. Hell is affirmed as actual, severe, penal, just, divinely ordained, and inscrutable, but it is not affirmed as endless. Like the Origenist tradition, this proposal suggests instead that the punishment of hell is limited. Unlike the Origenist tradition, however, the punishment is limited not by restoration but by annihilation. The wicked do not suffer eternal torment in the sense of suffering to all eternity after they are condemned. They are judged, terrified and destroyed. Although this vision is not lacking in severity, it at least tempers severity with clemency. It is thus less inscrutable than the Augustinian view regarding how eternal punishment can be compatible with the nature of the divine compassion.

No distinguished theologian seems to have defended this proposal in the early church. Its only known proponent was Arnobius (fl. 304-310), an apologist who wrote a treatise attacking the errors of pagan worship and mythology. One of two fates, Arnobius argued, awaited human beings. If they have heeded God, they will be delivered from death; but if they have not known God, they will perish (Against the Pagans, 2.14).<sup>21</sup> Those who die without God will undergo "annihilation," but it will not be sudden. Rather, it will be a "grievous and long-protracted punishment" (AP, 2.61). Arnobius agreed with Plato that the wicked would be cast into flames, but he rejected Plato's belief in the immortality of the soul. Arnobius apparently made no use of the Christian belief in resurrection. He especially accentuated the pain of affliction experienced by the lost before they were allowed to perish.

Although annihilationism had no distinguished defenders, it is interesting to note that it did have some distinguished opponents. Both Tertullian and Augustine were familiar with the idea, and both put some effort into refuting it. It seems unlikely that they would have done so, if there had not been at least some dissatisfaction among the Christian rank and file regarding the severity of the received tradition.<sup>22</sup>

Annihilationism has reappeared in recent times with some especially noteworthy defenders in the evangelical wing of the Protestant church. Prominent evangelicals like F. F. Bruce, Philip Hughes, John Wenham and John Stott have all endorsed such a view. As was the case with Augustine, the arguments of these proponents are typically marked by careful attention to the literal sense of the biblical texts before any generalizations are ventured about the nature of God. An attempt is thus made to modify the traditional view on the basis of the very same texts by which it has always been defended.

A vigorous and concise case for annihilationism has been published by John Stott, the prolific Christian writer, evangelical elder statesman, and former rector of the All Souls Anglican Church in London. Hell is defined as a “banishment from God” that is “real, terrible and eternal.”<sup>23</sup> Against the Origenist tradition, he sees no hint in the New Testament that a later reprieve or amnesty is possible. The point he wishes to explore is whether hell will involve, as the Augustinian tradition claims, the experience of everlasting suffering. “Will the final destiny of the impenitent,” he asks, “be conscious torment, ‘for ever and ever,’ or will it be a total annihilation of their being?” (EE, 314). Scripture, he argues, does not point toward endless conscious torment, but rather toward final annihilation. If so, the Augustinian tradition will have to yield “to the supreme authority of Scripture” (EE, 315). Stott offers four arguments for his view.<sup>24</sup>

First, there is the argument from language. The typical vocabulary of the New Testament for the final state of perdition is, Stott suggests, the vocabulary of destruction. An extensive list of passages is adduced to back this observation. “It would seem strange,” Stott concludes, “if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed” (EE, 316). Immortality is a gift of divine grace, not an irrevocable property of the soul. Although the impenitent will survive death and be raised up to judgment, they will finally be destroyed.

Second, there is the argument from imagery, and in particular that of fire. Fire is associated in our minds with “conscious torment,” because of the acute pain we experience when burned. “But the main function of fire,” observes Stott, “is not to cause pain,

but to secure destruction, as all the world’s incinertors bear witness” (EE, 316). Although in certain passages the fire itself is depicted as “eternal” and “unquenchable,” “it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed for ever, not tormented for ever” (EE, 316). A number of objections are considered to this interpretation of fire imagery. It is argued that images like “unquenchable fire” are not incompatible with the annihilationist interpretation. Torment means that the impenitent will consciously experience both the pain of loss and the accompanying pain of affliction before they finally perish (EE, 317-8). “The reality behind the imagery,” Stott concludes, “is that all enmity and resistance to God will be destroyed” (EE, 318).

Third, there is the argument from God’s justice. “I question,” Stott states, “whether ‘eternal conscious

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*“Freedom” is a theme that Robinson assumes he can develop without any serious reference to the problem of sin. Freedom is just something that we have, an inviolable, sacred potency that even God had better respect exactly as it stands. It is as pristine a source of autonomy for Robinson as any Enlightenment philosopher could hope to conjure up.*

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torment’ is compatible with the biblical revelation of divine justice” (EE, 319). Although the immense gravity of sin is not to be minimized, nevertheless eternal conscious torment as a penalty does not seem proportionate to the offense. Stott in effect rejects the Augustinian appeal to inscrutability at this point.

Finally, there is the argument from New Testament texts which point toward some sort of universalism. These texts do not mean that all persons will be saved. Here Stott is firmly within the bounds of the Augustinian tradition. “The hope of a final salvation,” he states, “is a false hope” (EE, 319). This conviction is based on the recorded warnings of Jesus that judgment will involve “a separation into two opposite but equally eternal destinies” (EE, 319). Yet it is hard to see how the universalist passages could be true if the impenitent were eternally persisting in

their impenitence. "It would be easier to hold together the awful reality of hell and the universal reign of God if hell means destruction and the impenitent are no more" (EE, 319).

These arguments, which are not weak, certainly deserve consideration as far as they go. Perhaps the strangest thing about them, however, is that they don't really go very far. They finally seem to be more nearly biblicist than evangelical in character. Jesus as a Teacher is afforded more prominence than Jesus as the Savior. Divine justice is considered from the standpoint of fairness, but not from the more deeply evangelical standpoint urged by Robinson when he asked about how God's justice was integrated with God's mercy. "I cherish the hope," writes Stott, "that the majority of the human race will be saved" (EE, 327). Although this seems a hope well worth cherishing, Stott articulates no real basis to make it convincing.

*Reverent Agnosticism: None of the Above*

When the question of universal salvation arose among the early Greek theologians, there sometimes emerged the theme of "holy silence." An initial instance of this theme may be found, for example, in Clement of Alexandria (ca.155-ca.220). When speaking about God's "work of saving righteousness," Clement developed a view of remedial punishment. Although this punishment took a different form for the virtuous than for the hardened, it led to repentance in either case. But that was not the whole story. "As to the rest," he wrote, "I keep silent, giving glory to God."<sup>25</sup> Clement did not abandon universal salvation as a hope, but he thought it best to be reticent in conclusion. A similar position may also have belonged to Origen. Although in my earlier remarks I have followed the standard interpretation, another possibility has recently been argued with some force. According to this newer outlook, Origen was more hesitant than has generally been appreciated. He did not attempt to reconcile all the statements of Scripture, because he did not really see how to do so. His views were more tentative than firm. He ventured different opinions in different places, but left the question of universal salvation open.<sup>26</sup> Another theologian who is generally thought to have defended universal salvation is Gregory of Nazianzus (330-389). Yet he too was a cautious supporter at best. He endorsed the universal hope of a final purgation from sins, but he could also state: "I know also a fire that is not cleansing, but avenging."<sup>27</sup> Finally, mention may be made of Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580-662). With him the note of holy silence openly reappears (although the contexts are often uncertain). God "loves all people equally," he wrote,

and in the event of the cross God has effected "the complete salvation of the race."<sup>28</sup> Yet these matters are very difficult, he confessed, and there are certain problems of scriptural interpretation that it may be best to "honor by silence."<sup>29</sup>

Although Karl Barth is often labelled as a "universalist," he is best understood as standing in the tradition of holy silence. If a forced option is urged between the proposition "All are saved" and the counter-proposition "Not all are saved," Barth's answer in effect is: "None of the above." Barth deliberately leaves the question open, though not in a neutral fashion, but with a strong tilt toward universal hope. Like Origen he finds it hard to see how God will not fully triumph in grace at the end. But like Augustine he has a chastened sense that human sin is profoundly inscrutable. Like Origen more than Augustine, he does not find a fully clear picture emerging from Scripture. But like Augustine more than Origen, his final concern as a theologian is not so much to respect the compromised "freedom" of fallen humanity, but rather to respect above all the sovereign freedom of divine grace. The result is holy silence, or as it has sometimes also been called, "reverent agnosticism."

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Barth is explicit in his rejection of the Origenist doctrine of apokatastasis. In its typical form, Barth observes, this doctrine argues for the restoration of all things by postulating "the infinite potentiality of the divine being" in relation to "an optimistic estimate" of human freedom.<sup>30</sup> Not only are these two postulates improper, as Barth sees it, but the whole line of argument is really a groundless abstraction. The reasoning is abstract, because it posits theoretical possibilities or general principles rather than working directly from divine revelation so that the appropriate concrete particulars can be seen in relation to the relevant whole. When God is understood concretely, it is clear that he "does not owe eternal patience" to human beings who persist in the depravity of their sin, nor does he owe them final deliverance.<sup>31</sup> Sinners, according to biblical revelation,

stand constantly under the threat of divine judgment and condemnation.

When sin is viewed concretely, moreover, it is clear that human freedom cannot be taken for granted as something that just we have. Freedom in the only relevant sense is at once the gift and requirement of God, and human beings have it only as they receive it and exercise it in obedience to God and by complete reliance on his grace. Freedom is not something that God merely “respects” in us, for it is not clear just what kind of freedom exists to be respected, unless it were the “freedom” to continue sinning. With respect to grace and freedom, Barth stands in the Pauline tradition as developed by Augustine and then especially as radicalized by Luther in works like *The*

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*Bondage of the Will.* The main characteristic of this tradition is perhaps that it heightens rather than resolves the conceptual tensions between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. These tensions can arguably not be resolved without distorting the actual encounters and renewed decisions at stake in an ongoing divine/human relationship situated in a living history.

If universal salvation should actually occur, writes Barth, “it can only be a matter of the unexpected work of grace” (IV/3, 477). It is not something we can calculate by a process of abstract reasoning which forgets that God is still God, and that sinners are still sinners. Not even the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ can be used as the basis for such abstractions. In reply to christocentric universalists like Robinson, Barth writes: “Even though theological consistency might seem to lead our thoughts and utterances most clearly in this direction, we must not arrogate to ourselves that which can be given and received only as a free gift” (IV/3, 477). It is not for fallen sinners to deduce what God “must” do in consummating his work of salvation.

However, although there can be a danger of saying too much, there can also be a danger of saying too little. The need for “holy silence” does not annul the need for “holy speech.” Although universal salvation cannot be deduced as a necessity, it cannot be excluded as a possibility. Neither the logical deduction nor the definite exclusion would properly respect the concrete freedom of God. When the reality of Jesus Christ is taken properly into account, “does it not point,” asks Barth, “plainly in the direction of the work of a truly eternal divine patience and deliverance and therefore of an apokatastasis or universal reconciliation?” (IV/3, 478). This work would be “supremely the work of God” to which we as sinners have simply no claim; but although we cannot claim it as a right or a necessity, surely, writes Barth, “we are commanded to hope and pray for it” here and now (IV/3, 478). We hope and pray “cautiously and yet distinctly” that God’s compassion should not fail, and that he will not cast us off for ever (IV/3, 478).

Robinson asserted, it will be recalled, that God’s justice could not be understood as something separated from God’s mercy, for God’s justice is in fact an expression of his mercy. Although no one has argued this point more forcefully or more extensively than Karl Barth, he still disagrees fundamentally with Robinson on a crucial point. He does not downplay the severity of God’s justice, but if anything he amplifies it. The biblical God, Barth urges, is not merely a God who makes alive. Nor is he merely a God who slays and makes alive. He is a God who makes alive only by actually slaying, and who slays only to make actually alive. Again, this remark is not an abstract principle but, so to speak, a concrete narrative pattern derived from crucial elements in the biblical story, a pattern that keeps the final outcome at once oriented and yet also open. It is a remark that is concrete rather than abstract, because it is meant to be narratological rather than theoretical, and in that way theological rather than philosophical. The God of cross and resurrection whom Barth finds attested in Holy Scripture is not a God for the squeamish. But he is a God who encloses his No, however severe, within the amplitude of a much larger Yes; and yet who also hides his Yes, however luminous, deep within the abyss of his No.

No one, Barth teaches, will escape the wrath and judgment of God. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (II Cor. 5:10). In this judgment God does not pay obeisance to our freedom. On the contrary, he takes our freedom from us. He makes us so powerless that he hands us over to the power of our enemy, a power that is too great for us, that it may dominate us (II/2, 484). This enemy into whose hands we are delivered is our own sinful work.

In judgment God abandons us to this work and therefore to our actual destruction. As indicated by the relevant New Testament passages, the punishment in each case is that we are handed over to the full consequences of the existence we have actually chosen for ourselves by our deeds. We do not withstand this judgment. We fall, but we fall only where we have put ourselves. We are not made alive; we are slain. "This is the work," writes Barth, "of the wrath of God. It is a stern, burning, destroying wrath. It is impossible . . . to make a single reservation or in any way to soften or diminish the severity of this event" (II/2, 485). Although the context for these remarks shows that Barth is thinking directly of those who have fallen away from their faith, or of those who have rejected their election, there is no reason to believe that he is not thinking indirectly of all others as well. For there is a solidarity in sin that will have similar dreadful consequences in punishment for all, regardless of any differences of degree, or of election, or of faith (cf. IV/3, 928).

The only question is not whether we will be judged according to our works, but whether there is somehow the possibility of hope for those who have no hope. Is there a possibility in and with the finality of our being destroyed that God may nonetheless still be enjoined to be our God? Is there a "final possibility — or, rather, an entirely new possibility beyond the completed judgment, beyond the payment of the last farthing"? (II/2, 486). Even for those who have rejected their election, "there is still the prospect of it," suggests Barth, "even if in endless remoteness and depth" (II/2, 486). God's punishment "is not an end in itself" (II/2, 486). God still offers something "by and beyond destruction" (II/2, 486). "What is meant," explains Barth, "is obviously the eschatological possibility, salvation on the day of the Lord. This does not remove or weaken the punishment, but it gives it a limit which encloses even that which is boundless in itself, eternal fire" (II/2, 486). Note that Barth does not separate the retributive and remedial elements in this punishment, nor does he diminish its severity. He looks only for the larger and hidden divine Yes that may yet surround, limit and enclose the necessary No in all its terrible severity.

The wrath of God revealed from heaven (Rom. 1:18) is not split off from the rest of the divine life. It is a manifestation of God's saving righteousness. It is actually intrinsic, states Barth, to "the judicial sentence by which those Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ are acquitted and justified. This sentence is itself annihilating in its action" (II/2, 487). Note that here Barth obviously accepts a form of annihilationism. Unlike Stott's version, it foresees not an annihilation for the few or for the many, but for all. It is an annihilation in which the only possible hope for anyone is the faith given and received by grace. This annihilation excludes all humankind, Barth comments, "from any freedom or justification except those that come by faith. It judges human beings absolutely. It utterly abandons them. It burns

them right down to faith, as it were, that there it may promise and give them as believers both freedom and justification" (II/2, 487 rev.). God indeed annihilates us by his wrath when he hands us over to ourselves. "But what this involves," Barth writes, "is not foreign to the love of God. On the contrary, it is his love which burns in this way, burning away in human beings that which opposes and defies it, in order that they really live by faith in Jesus Christ" (II/2, 487 rev.), and at last be saved like a brand plucked out of the burning (Amos 4:11).

The judgment of God, the final redeeming act of God, and the return of Jesus Christ in the glory of his universal revelation are not so much three separate actions, suggests Barth, as one and the same action with three distinct aspects. This juridical, redemptive and revelatory event will not occur only for believers. It will "not be particular but universal" (IV/3, 931). All human beings — each individual believer along with the whole Christian community and the entire human race — "will have to pass," states Barth, "into the burning, searching, purifying fire of the gracious judgment of the One who comes, and to pass through this fire no matter what the result may be" (IV/3, 931). Although the fire will be at once fearful yet also purifying and gracious, Barth deliberately ventures no suggestion about what the final result for unbelievers will be. He states only that everyone will somehow be released from "the contradiction in

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which they now exist," and that somehow every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:10-11) (IV/3, 931-2). The form that this confession and release will finally take for unbelievers is left open.

If one asks about the fate of those who never encountered the Gospel, Barth retains his careful reticence. Like Augustine he acknowledges that the majority of the human race actually falls into this category. Yet we may count upon it "quite unconditionally," he writes:

that Jesus Christ has risen for each and every one of this majority too; that his Word as the Word of reconciliation enacted in him is spoken for them as it is spoken personally and undeservedly for [each individual believer], that in him all were and are objectively intended and addressed whether or not they have heard or will hear it in the course of history and prior to its end and goal; that the same Holy Spirit who has been incomprehensibly strong enough to enlighten his [the believer's] own dark heart will perhaps one day find a little less trouble with them; and decisively that when the day of the coming of Jesus Christ in consummating revelation does at last dawn it will quite definitely be that day when not [the believer] himself, but the One whom [the believer] expects as a Christian, will know how to reach them, so that the quick and the dead, those who came and went both ante and post Christum, will hear his voice, whatever its signification for them (John 5:25) (IV/3, 918).

The day of universal revelation, Barth suggests, as itself the day of judgment, will disclose that Jesus Christ himself has always somehow accompanied every member of the human race. If not directly through revelation by grace to faith, then he will have done so at least indirectly in some unknown and incognito form. That form will at last be divested of its hiddenness and revealed to each one for what it was and is and is to be, in its gracious significance and inevitable judgment, before the consuming fire of God.

If God's mercy were proclaimed without judgment, or if God's love were proclaimed without wrath, or if a myth of gentle leading were proclaimed in which none were slain to be made alive, and none were alive who had not been slain, then the cross of Christ would be unintelligible. God imposes no severity on others which, in the death of his Son on the cross, he has not already suffered himself to an incalculably greater degree. The punishment that we may suffer, writes Barth, "is surpassed even before it begins, and overshadowed at once, by that which the delivered Jesus Christ had to endure for the sake of our trespasses" (II/2, 494). Barth elaborates:

Before we are touched or can be touched by any pain which we have brought on ourselves by our sin and guilt, before we are sorry for or can be sorry for our sin, before death and hell can frighten us, and before we feel the greater terror that we are such sinners as have deserved death and hell, already in the One against whom we sin and are guilty and whose punishment threatens us we have to do with the God who himself suffers pain because of our sin and guilt, for whom it is not an alien thing but his own intimate concern. And as God is far greater than we his creatures, so much greater is his sorrow on our behalf than any sorrow which we can feel for ourselves.<sup>32</sup>

We know, states Barth, "only one certain triumph of hell" — the cross of Golgotha on which Jesus died for our sins — and "this triumph of hell took place in order that it would never again be able to triumph

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over anyone. . . . We know of only One who was abandoned in this way, and only of One who was lost. This One is Jesus Christ. And he was lost (and found again) in order that none should be lost apart from him" (II/2, 498). When we know this One by faith and see what he endured for the sake of the world, then no matter how desperate the situation may be, we will not abandon hope for anyone, not even for ourselves.

## Conclusion: The Locus of Mystery

The strong view of hell as represented by Augustine would seem to be admirable at least for its unflinching consistency and for its steadfast appeal to the primacy and sovereignty of divine grace. If there is ever to be any larger hope within the bounds of traditional belief beyond the state of the question as Augustine left it, then that hope would seem necessarily to rest not on an appeal to unfettered human freedom (as in the weaker post-Augustinian apologies), but rather on an appeal to sovereign grace. For if it is indeed "grace alone," as Augustine argued, "that separates the redeemed from the lost" (Enchr., XCIX), and if, as he also urged, God can actually "change the evil wills of human beings, whichever, whenever, and wheresoever he chooses, and direct them to what is good" (Enchr., XCVIII), then the church may finally have grounds for a larger hope than Augustine found it possible to affirm.

The New Testament texts as Augustine read them would have to be reconfigured into a very different hermeneutical whole. Although that whole may have been glimpsed by Origen, the hermeneutical tradition that he spawned has too often been encumbered by rationalizing and otherwise extraneous considerations. At its best, however, that tradition has focussed concretely on the cross of Christ as the demonstration of God's love for the entire world. On that basis it has refused not only to separate God's justice so drastically from God's mercy, or indeed to leave the two standing in apparent, severe and inscrutable contradiction. It has also refused to allow the important universalist passages in the New Testament to be so thoroughly marginalized by those that depict the ultimate consequences of divine wrath. If the mark of a good theology is that it knows how to honor the necessary mysteries, then there may be higher and reconfigured mysteries that the Augustinian tradition knows not of.

## End Notes

[1] D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

[2] Martin E. Marty, "Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed. A Civic Argument," *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985), pp. 381-98.

[3] "Hell's Sober Comeback," *U. S. News & World Report*, 25 March 1991, p. 56.

[4] See, for example, Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) and Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[5] Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Christianity and the West: Ambiguous Past, Uncertain Future," *First Things* (Dec. 1994), pp. 18-23.

[6] Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), pp. 215-18. For a recent indication of official Roman Catholic teaching about hell, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1994), p. 270 (#1035). The explicit affirmation that hell is actual (#1035) is implicitly held in tension with a hope that it is not (p. 275, #1058).

[7] J. I. Packer, "Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation," in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. Kenneth Kantzer and Carl Henry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). For a more extended argument, see Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1995).

[8] For a different definition of this term, see Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*, Ch. 1.

[9] Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, ed. Henry Paolucci (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1961). (Hereafter cited as Enchr.)

[10] Augustine, *City of God*, ed. David Knowles (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972). (Hereafter cited as CofG.)

[11] For a full inventory and classification of the relevant passages, see John W. Wenham, "The Case for Conditional Immortality," in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), pp. 169-74. Wenham finds 264 references in the New Testament to the fate of the lost.

[12] Henri Blocher, "Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil," in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, p. 295. Note that although human freedom and responsibility have always been axiomatic for the Augustinian view, they have not always been assigned the apologetic function Blocher observes in the more recent arguments.

[13] Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 59.

[14] Origen, Hom., I Sam. 28:10. Quoted by Lawrence R. Hennessy, "The Place of Saints and Sinners after Death," in *Origen of Alexandria*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Peterson (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 300.

[15] Origen, Hom., Lv. 5:3. Quoted by Hennessy, p. 305.

[16] Origen, *On First Principles*, ed. G. W. Butterworth (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). (Hereafter cited as FP.)

[17] Origen: *Contra Celsum*, ed. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953). (Hereafter cited as CC.)

[18] Hom., Lv. 7:2. Quoted by Henri Crouzel, *Origen* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 247.

[19] John A. T. Robinson, *In the End God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). See, for example, pp. 135-7. (Hereafter cited as IEG.)

[20] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937), p. 193.

[21] Arnobius, "Against the Pagans," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 6, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987). (Hereafter cited as AP.)

[22] See, for example, Tertullian, "On the Resurrection of the Flesh," XXXV; and Augustine, Enchr., CXII; CofG, XI, 27; XIX, 28; XXI, 17.

[23] David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), pp. 312-20; on p. 314. (Hereafter cited as EE.)

[24] Note that Stott indicates that he holds this view "tentatively" (EE, 320).

[25] Clement of Alexandria, Str. 7, 12, 3-13, 1. Quoted by Daley, "Apokatastasis and 'Honorable Silence' in the Eschatology of Maximus the Confessor," in *Maximus Confessor*, ed. Felix Heinzer and Christoph Schänborn (Fribourg: Editions universitaires, 1982), p. 321n.

[26] Crouzel, Origen (note 19), p. 264.

[27] Gregory of Nazianzus, "On Holy Baptism," 40.36. Quoted by Daley, *Hope of the Early Church* (note 14), p. 84.

[28] Maximus the Confessor, Carit. 1, 61 and Amb. Th. 4. Quoted by Daley, "Apokatastasis and 'Honorable Silence,'" p. 328.

[29] Maximus, Qual. Thal., Prol. Quoted by Daley, "Apokatastasis and 'Honorable Silence,'" p. 316.

[30] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II, Part 2 (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 295. (Hereafter cited as II/2.)

[31] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, Part 3 (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1961 & 1962), p. 477. (Hereafter cited as IV/3.)

[32] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II, Part 1 (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 373.

# A Neglected Theme in the Life of the Church: Divine Judgment in the Synoptic Gospels

by Steve Matthies

There is a widespread belief in mainline churches today that Jesus preached love, not judgment. One reason so many people hold to this view is that it seems to fit so well with what we find in the gospels. Jesus *did* preach love. Not only did he talk about love, he demonstrated it, most fully and obviously in his death on the cross. This view also fits with one of the core values of our society in recent years, tolerance. Aware of the need for basic civility, our culture has elevated the values of tolerance and acceptance above almost all others. Any notion of evaluative distinction between one set of beliefs and practices and another must be, at the very least, downplayed. This tendency in society has made itself felt within the church, with the result that God is increasingly understood to be a God of love and tolerance, not judgment.

There is certainly a broad stream of theological scholarship that would not wish to question this understanding. In his essay on apocalyptic in Matthew's gospel, for example, O. Lamar Cope speaks for many in the academy and the church when he concludes,

[Christianity's] finest insights about God, human life, and discipleship are anchored in a radical understanding of the grace of God which negates the dark side of apocalyptic.... For my part it seems clear that the punishment side of the 'rewards and punishments' theology and ethic of apocalyptic is an obstacle and not an assistance to life and faith. It is no accident that most Christians have simply glossed over Matthew's strict apocalyptic stress in their reading and use of this great book. For that stress will not finally rest at home either with Jesus' call to trusting faith or with Paul's call to live by grace.<sup>1</sup>

But does Jesus preach a form of love that is exclusive of judgment? Many of the editorial choices in the

church's lectionary readings would leave this impression. But when read as a whole, the gospels reveal a very different picture: divine judgment is an integral part of the message of Jesus.

In this essay, I will limit most of my observations to the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), for two reasons. First, to discuss Paul's letters in depth would add significantly to the length of this study, and second, many church members associate their picture of a God who would not possibly judge people with the synoptic gospels and their portrayal of Jesus.

This study will forgo a close reading of each passage which contains the theme of God's judgment in favor of more general observations of the pattern, recurrence and function of judgment language in the synoptic gospels. This will allow us to recognize that the widespread understanding that God's love does not include judgment is a *selective* portrait. In making this selection, moreover, the church is losing sight of an important dimension of God. A careful recovery of the theological dimension of eschatological (future) judgment may help the church be more faithful to God.

## Matthew

We begin with Matthew. Divine judgment enters the first gospel with the appearance of John the Baptist (Mt. 3:7-12). In his preparatory message for the coming of Jesus, John mentions the coming wrath (Mt. 3:7), and three times emphasizes a judgment by fire (Mt. 3:10, 11, 12). This 'fire' may refer to the 'hell

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of fire' Jesus will mention in Mt. 5:22, or to a more general means of judgment by God. Whichever is meant, according to John, Jesus himself will be the agent of judgment.

Jesus first speaks of judgment explicitly in Mt. 5:21-26. In v.22, he employs three images—well known to his audience—to indicate the ultimate consequences of verbally mistreating fellow disciples (and presumably others as well): the town court ("judgment"); the regional court ("the council"); and the Valley of Hinnom ("the hell of fire").

The Valley of Hinnom (Geh Hinnom in Hebrew; Gehenna in Greek, which we translate as 'hell') was a valley bordering Jerusalem on the Southwest. The Old Testament informs us that the Valley of Hinnom was at various times used by Israel in disobedience to God as the site of child sacrifice by fire to Molech, a deity affiliated with the Ammonites (2 Kings 23:10, 2 Chr. 28:3, Jer. 32:35). This association affords Jesus a vivid depiction of the final judgment by God. But we should note that Jesus and the New Testament authors refrain from speculation about the topography of hell. The main concern is the *fact* of God's judgment, not its method.

According to Matthew Jesus returns to this image of Gehenna in the Sermon on the Mount in Mt. 5:29-30, when he warns against lust. Although Jesus does not mention hell again after his instruction on lust, a life and death significance pervades his instructions on discipleship in Mt. 5-7. Consider the tenor of his four final teachings: the road to destruction and the road to life (Mt. 7:13-14); false prophets (Mt. 7:15-20); 'Lord, Lord'-sayers (Mt. 7:21-23); and house-builders (Mt. 7:24-27). These four topics bring the Sermon on the Mount to its conclusion. All four serve to warn disciples of the final judgment (the "on that day" of v. 22), and underscore the seriousness and authority of Jesus.

As Jesus descends from the mountain, Matthew records him entering Capernaum, and encountering a Centurion, who was not part of the historic people of God. Jesus praises the man's faith in his powerful word, and in the same breath warns of a final judgment for those of God's people who do not respond to him with the trust of the Centurion (Mt. 8:5-13).

Jesus also refers to the eschatological judgment of God as part of his missionary instructions to his dis-

ciples (Mt. 10:1-42). Those who reject the disciples or their message will not fare well on "the day of judgment" (Mt. 10:15). Then later he encourages his disciples not to fear those who will reject and even persecute them, but to fear "the one who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt. 10:28). In vv. 29-30, where Jesus affirms God's providence and high valuation of his people, he also reveals that this fear is not a cringing, anxious posture, but rather a well-founded trust in God. He follows with the claim (Mt. 10:32) that the eternal well-being of every disciple depends on each one's public confession of Jesus. The whole instruction speech sets both the mission of the disciples, and the response of those to whom they are sent, in an eschatologically loaded context. The disciples' mission has eternal consequences.

Reference to "the day of judgment" recurs in Jesus' reproach to "the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent" (Mt. 11:20, NRSV). The day of judgment will be less tolerable for them than for the pagan cities, Tyre and

Sidon (Mt. 11:22, 24), based on their (lack of) response to Jesus.

In the next chapter, Jesus warns the Pharisees who have attributed his deeds to Satan's power that at the judgment they will be held accountable to God for their speech, which in turn discloses their spiritual health, their inner disposition (Mt. 12:36). Consequently, Jesus relates that at the judgment even the Ninevites and the queen of Sheba will "rise up and con-

demn" this generation for its faithless response to him (Mt. 12:41-42), and it will be characterized finally by the overwhelming presence of evil (Mt. 12:45).

Explaining a parable (Mt. 13:24-30) about the kingdom of heaven, Jesus teaches his disciples that the Son of Man himself will play an active role in the final judgment (Mt. 13:41-42; 49-50) through his angels. This theme is sounded again in Mt. 16:27, this time in the language of repayment for deeds.

We find a remedy for unrighteous living in Mt. 18:8-9 similar to that noted earlier at Mt. 5:29-30, with the same warning about "eternal fire" and "the hell of fire" (this follows on the heels of a warning not to cause other disciples to sin in Mt. 18:6-7). Disciples are to take serious measures with themselves so as to avoid even more serious, eternal measures taken by God. Unwillingness to forgive other dis-

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ciples constitutes a particularly grave threat to one's eternal state (Mt. 18:35; cf. Mt. 6:15).

Jesus' judgment teaching in Matthew even makes special room for the twelve disciples to participate in the final judging activity of the Son of Man (Mt. 19:28). But before that future time, God, according to Jesus in Matthew's gospel, will visit judgment upon unfaithfulness toward Jesus (Mt. 21:33-44) and hostility toward his messengers (Mt. 23:29-38; cf. v. 33 where this hostility will quite possibly result in judgment of hell) within history (Mt. 23:36). The seven "woes" against the Jewish leadership in Mt. 23 form a particularly strong accusation which serves almost as a trial scene within the total drama of Matthew's gospel, anticipating God's final judgment on unfaithfulness and

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obstinacy in the face of God's righteous activity. The conclusion of chapter 23 reveals the devastating nature of this divine judgment, where Jesus indicates the departure of God's presence from the Temple, evoking memories of the Babylonian exile (Mt. 23:37-39; cf. e.g., Jer. 4:11-28).

Jesus' teaching on the future picks up pace and utilizes explicitly apocalyptic imagery in chapter 24, his sermon on the end time. The future coming of the Son of Man (Mt. 24:36f) is compared to God's judgment on sinful humanity in the generation of Noah (cf. Gen. 6:5-7). Disciples do not know when their Lord will return (Mt. 24:44), so they must be "at work" doing the will of God at all times and refraining from wickedness (Mt. 24:45-51), lest judgment find them wanting. Warnings to disciples to stay prepared (Mt. 25:1-13), remain trustworthy (Mt. 25:14-30), and serve "the least of these" (Mt. 25:31-46) all receive added motivational urgency from an appeal to the context of a final judgment.

The very structure of Matthew's gospel underscores the theme of judgment, as Ulrich Luz demonstrates particularly with reference to Mt. 21:1-25:46.<sup>2</sup> Luz shows the progression of Jesus' judgment warn-

ings in this section from their initial focus on the Jewish leaders, to an expanded audience which includes that entire generation, and finally to the church. Matthew builds this judgment theme to a climax, featuring parables, end time teachings, and woes against religious leaders, concluding not with a parable, as is often thought, but with a proleptic description of the eschatological judgment itself (Mt. 25:31-46). To ignore Jesus' preaching of judgment in Matthew's gospel is to miss the structural cues Matthew uses to feature divine judgment as one of his main theological concerns.

### *Mark*

Assuming, as most New Testament scholarship does, that Matthew followed Mark's account when he wrote his gospel, a brief survey of judgment language in Mark will help us to see *both* the fact that Mark understood Jesus to warn of a future judgment, and that Matthew has given far greater emphasis to this aspect of his teaching than Mark.

It is obvious that Mark did not include reference to wrath or a judgment by fire when summarizing John the Baptist's proclamation (Mk. 1:7-8). Rather, Mark will wait until more than halfway through his gospel to introduce explicit language (although see Mk. 8:38 for implicit mention) about a future judgment (Mk. 9:43-48; cf. Mt. 18:6-9), which is cast in terms of a "hell," or "eternal fire," and serves to warn disciples not to take personal occasions for sin lightly.

Mark will not include mention of judgment again until Jesus mentions it in a parable about God's judgment upon rebellious vineyard tenants (Mk. 12:1-11; cf. Mt. 21:33-46), which the religious leaders (Mk. 11:27) recognized as referring to themselves (Mk. 12:12).

The only other reference to judgment is in the oblique statement (Mk. 13:32), "But about that day or hour no one knows," with "that day" presumably being used as shorthand for the future day of judgment when "the master of the house" (Mk. 13:35) will come suddenly. Its presence here is meant to encourage alertness and endurance in discipleship.

### *Luke*

What do we find when we turn to Luke's gospel, which is often thought of as the gospel of mercy and compassion? As in Matthew's gospel, the theme of judgment arrives first through John the Baptist under the rubric of "the coming wrath" (Lk. 3:7). John here backs up his call to a reformed way of life with a warning about being thrown into the fire (Lk. 3:9).

Again, as in Matthew's gospel, John the Baptist presages Jesus' public ministry by anticipating Jesus' baptism "with fire" (Lk. 3:16) which will be inextinguishable (Lk. 3:17). Noteworthy here are Luke's very next words about John: "So, with many other exhortations, he *proclaimed the good news to the people*" (Lk. 3:18; NRSV). In Luke's estimation, John's warning of a future judgment constituted part of the proclamation of the "good news" — the gospel! Not everyone agreed with Luke, of course. Jesus' original hearers were initially amazed at his "gracious words" (Lk. 4:22), but by the end of his first (rather condemnatory) sermon they were "filled with rage" (Lk. 4:28) and attempted to kill him (Lk. 4:29).

If not an explicit statement, judgment reemerges in the Lucan "Sermon on the Plain" (Lk. 6:20-49). Four beatitudes (Lk. 6:20-23) are followed by four woes (Lk. 6:24-26), the first three of which harken to an eschatological dimension. Future negative repercussions will replace present material wealth. Jesus warns disciples to be careful how they live now, because God will someday set things right. At the end of the sermon, Jesus implies a future judgment through the example of the ruined house (Lk. 6:47-49).

Judgment language next surfaces in Jesus' missionary instructions to seventy of his followers (Lk. 10:1f). Those who do not welcome the disciples, and by implication the kingdom of God (Lk. 10:11) will find "that day," namely the day of judgment, less tolerable than will Sodom (Lk. 10:12). That

"that day" represents the eschatological day of judgment is reinforced by explicit reference to "the judgment" in the pair of woes directed at Chorazin and Bethsaida (Lk. 10:13-14), two cities near the center of Jesus' Galilean ministry — Capernaum, which Jesus also warns of the coming judgment for its unfaithfulness (Lk. 10:15).

When alerted that his warnings (woes) to the Pharisees (Lk. 11:42-44) were offensive to a teacher of the law (Lk. 11:45), Jesus demonstrated no excess of social graces by immediately including the teacher and his social circle along with the others whom he

warned (Lk. 11:46-52), reserving his most serious criticisms for them. In the face of their hostile reaction, Jesus instructs his disciples not to fear them but to fear the one who, "after having killed, has power to cast into hell" (Lk. 12:5). As in Matthew, the intention is not to cause worry but to bolster confidence in the face of opposition (Lk. 12:6-7).

A little later in the same teaching session Jesus warned his disciples, by way of reference to the return of the Son of Man at an unexpected time (Lk. 12:40), to prepare themselves and do what God wants them to do' (Lk. 12:47), so as to avoid severe judgment (12:46, 48). He underscores this warning with reference to the future judgment, which he describes as an integral reason for Jesus' ministry (Lk. 12:49-50).

Like Matthew, Luke includes Jesus' teaching about a future division of the faithful and . evildoers which will elicit "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Lk. 13:28; cf. Mt. 25:30). He alludes to judgment later in the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31), where the rich man who had ignored the needs of the poor Lazarus now finds himself in a place of torment (Lk. 16:28).

### *Jesus forbids disciples to judge others.*

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*However, Jesus does teach a process of church discipline, so that while judgmentalism against others is prohibited, the church does have a very carefully defined role in divine judgment, given by Jesus himself.*

*The church's action is clearly understood here as an extension of the authority of Jesus.*

the kingdom comes, Luke includes the parable of the pounds two chapters later (Lk. 19:11-27), which includes overtones of the future judgment (Lk. 19:27) as its main incentive to faithfulness in the interim. But judgment for Jesus is not reserved for the future; it will interrupt business as usual (Lk. 19:41-44). That is, the judgment of God rendered for unfaithful response to Jesus will happen both in the present (as in Lk. 20:18a) and in the future (as in Lk. 20:18b). In Luke's understanding of the future judgment, as in Matthew's, Jesus accords each of his twelve disciples a throne of judgment (Lk. 22:30).

Interestingly, in Luke's second volume, Acts, Peter gives a speech to Cornelius and those with him in which he says that God has ordained Jesus "as judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42). Jesus is nowhere called "judge" in the synoptic gospels, though that function is attributed to him in various ways as we have seen. But Luke shows here that this is, in fact, one dimension of his work and office. This function is expressed again by Paul in Acts, who tells the Athenians that, "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed," that is, by Jesus (Acts 17:30-31, NRSV).

Perhaps the irony in view of these observations about Luke's writings is that the wealthiest church members in the world find Luke's portrait of Jesus least inclined toward judgment of the three synoptics gospels.

#### *Judgment in the Synoptic Gospels*

The point of this set of observations about judgment language in the synoptic gospels is not to argue that this is *all* that we find there. Indeed, that is certainly *not* the case. These observations take Jesus' judgment teachings out of the gospel context in which we find them, and thus are a distortion of our Lord's ministry if made to stand alone. The point is rather to enable the recognition that the widely held assumption that Jesus did not warn of judgment (because God and Jesus are only loving) is itself a *selective* portrait, which depends for its perpetuation on the sustained practice of overlooking what judgment teaching there is in the gospels themselves.

This assumption appears also to define love so as to exclude warnings of judgment, prior to examining the gospels, and so by definition concludes that the warnings of judgment in the gospels cannot be loving. It is noteworthy that New Testament scholarship would not dispute the basic findings articulated above, at least in the main. However, the mainline church does tend to emphasize God's love and grace while deemphasizing, or ignoring altogether, God's judgment.

While there are probably many reasons for this tendency in the church, surely one of the reasons, for Protestants at least, is that a final judgment and the human accountability it implies seem to run directly contrary to Paul's emphasis on justification by faith. So, without giving extensive treatment of Paul's letters, we may consider briefly what evidence there is, if any, for Paul's belief in a future judgment. There is no dearth of scholarly debate on the sig-

nificance of judgment teaching in Paul, of course, but it is important for our purposes mainly to note its presence, so as not to leave the impression that only the synoptic gospels include mention of a final judgment.

#### *Paul*

Several passages in Paul's undisputed letters<sup>3</sup> make mention of judgment. In 1 Corinthians, Paul discourages the Corinthian believers from aligning themselves with certain human ministers of the gospel over against others (1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:3-9), and notes in this connection that each worker will "receive wages" commensurate with their labor (1 Cor. 3:8). "Wages" here refers not to financial remuneration but to an eschatological response from God in keeping with one's work. Similarly, Paul invokes the

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eschatological day of judgment (1 Cor. 3:13, "the day"), at which time each worker's results will be disclosed and tested "by fire." If workers have proved careless, their work will perish, though they themselves "will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:15, NRSV). The language of eschatological judgment is quite clear. It is clear again in even starker form when God's destruction of community-destroyers is foreseen (1 Cor. 3:17). Much more positively, judgment is anticipated in 1 Cor. 4:5.

Paul is equally unreserved in his mention of the final judgment in 2 Corinthians. In order to stress the importance of living a life pleasing, or acceptable to God (2 Cor. 5:9), Paul reminds his hearers that "all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:10, NRSV). This judgment scene is invoked again when Paul is discussing false apostles, whose "end will match their deeds" (2 Cor. 11:15).

In Romans, we find teaching about the day of judgment (lit., “of wrath,” Rom. 2:5) which basically agrees with that found in 2 Corinthians. One passage (Rom. 2:6-11) has occasioned strenuous debate, particularly because interpreters have wrestled with the implications it has for one’s understanding of Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith. That problem is, of course, far beyond the scope of this article to address, but it needs to be noted. In any case, we may observe that Paul here in Rom. 2, and again in Rom. 14:10-12, mentions a final judgment or reckoning, and does so without indicating any awareness on his part of attendant theological difficulties such as arise for later, particularly post-Reformation, interpreters.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Four Theological Questions*

Having observed the strong presence of judgment language in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke much more than Mark (and having noted by way of comparison with Paul’s letters that the synoptic writers were not mavericks in this respect), what may we say is its function in the preaching of Jesus as found in the writings of the evangelists? This question is not meant to suggest a purely rhetorical use of judgment themes. On the contrary, the most basic function of judgment language in the gospels is to describe what Jesus and the evangelists believed *was really going to happen*. But given that conviction, we may inquire further about the way in which Jesus and the gospel writers spoke of that coming event. Four questions will organize our discussion at this point: Who judges? Who is judged and for what are they judged? When? And for what purpose?

First, in the synoptics, who judges? It is overwhelmingly clear that, according to all three synoptic gospel writers, God (or the Son of Man) will judge, not disciples.<sup>5</sup> It is crucial to note that Jesus forbids disciples to judge others (Mt. 7:1; Lk. 6:37). The church is never permitted an attitude of judgmentalism toward anyone, inside or outside of the community of faith. However, Jesus does teach a process of church discipline (Mt. 18:15-18), so that while judgmentalism against others is prohibited, the church does have a very carefully defined role in divine judgment, given by Jesus himself. The church’s action is clearly understood here as an extension of the authority of Jesus.

Second, who is judged and for what are they judged? Significantly, in the synoptics it is those who are the “in” people of God who are warned of judgment, particularly the religious leaders, and not the pagan outsiders.<sup>6</sup> And they are warned of a coming judgment on the basis of their faithful or unfaithful response to Jesus and his teaching. Although the ex-

pectation of a judgment according to deeds is well-attested in Jewish literature predating the gospels, in the gospels its eschatological focus is almost exclusively narrowed to peoples’ reception or rejection of Jesus and his kingdom message. This, of course, was supremely offensive during the period of the early Christian missionary movement, as evidenced by the tension within the gospels between followers of Jesus and the Jewish leaders. It is no less offensive today, certainly to non-Christians, but in many cases also to Christians who bristle at the suggestion that not all religious roads lead to the same destination.

Third, when is the judgment? While there are indications of a temporal judgment as we have seen occasionally in the gospels, much of the expectation is for a future “day of the Lord.” The time is never specified; this chronological uncertainty is pressed into the service of exhortation to faithful readiness (cf. Mt. 24:36-44).

Fourth, for what purpose is the judgment mentioned? O. Lamar Cope asks this question<sup>7</sup> and answers by way of the function of judgment in apocalyptic thought more generally. He locates three main functions of judgment in apocalyptic writings: 1) to provide believers with hope in difficult times, 2) to reassure believers that justice will be done, and 3) to motivate right living.<sup>8</sup> Cope maintains that, at least in Matthew’s gospel, while all three functions are variously at work, the “dominant role” is that of “avoiding punishment for misdeeds and receiving reward for good deeds.”<sup>9</sup> He further says that “within that dominant theme the pre-eminent concern of the author is the valuable role which such an expectation plays in directing the behavior of the disciples, that is, of the church.”<sup>10</sup> This seems to be the main function of judgment warnings in all three synoptic gospels. They are included, and included quite frequently in Matthew and Luke, we might add, in order to encourage faithful living among followers of Jesus. The very frequency of judgment language serves as a constant reminder of the urgency and ultimacy of faithfulness to Jesus.

#### *Conclusion*

With these observations and conclusions in view, I submit that in overlooking judgment in the gospels (and the whole of the New Testament) the church is ignoring a central theological teaching of Scripture, and that a wise and loving preaching and teaching of the eschatological judgment will benefit the church and its mission in the world.

This thesis is, to be sure, not without its detractors, as we have seen above in the representative comments by O. Lamar Cope, who finds a tension

between grace and judgment so irreconcilable that it must finally be eliminated by a decision in favor of a particular understanding of love at the expense of biblical teachings about divine judgment.

Yet based on our survey of the occurrences of the judgment theme of apocalyptic in the synoptics and briefly in Paul, it is not at all clear that this theme is foreign to Jesus' emphasis on faith or to Paul's emphasis on grace. Precisely the opposite appears to be true. We get our portrait of Jesus from the gospels, and they agree in depicting Jesus warning his followers of a future judgment. Neither Jesus nor Paul give any indication of sitting uneasily with judgment language--they are the ones who use it!

It seems rather that Jesus warns about a real future judgment out of a desire to save people, not harm them. He warns *because he loves*. There is no contradiction here. The one follows from the other. Thus the church does our Lord no service when it carefully avoids warning of a coming judgment. When the church does this it ends up openly proclaiming, or silently condoning, the currently popular ethic of hyper-tolerance. Any notion of ultimate accountability recedes into the background. Yet if Jesus was right, and there will be a final judgment which holds individuals and communities accountable for their commitments and actions, then the refusal to broach this subject may potentially harm, rather than help people. Surely the church has caused great harm in the past due to an unloving or even vindictive judgment preaching. But the abuse of a thing does not make wrong its prayerful and discerning use.

Thus, I may suggest by way of conclusion that the three functions of apocalyptic judgment teaching delineated by Cope and discerned in the gospels, may benefit the contemporary church, when appropriated wisely and in love. Much more theological work is called for, of course, in order to work toward a faithful recovery of the New Testament's varied and challenging teaching of divine judgment. But surely believers today, no less than in the first century, need the assurance of a future hope, confidence that a just God will finally right the wrong in the world, and the constant reminder that self-sacrificing discipleship is worth the cost not just now but in the long run. We may in good conscience trust that these three things are the gifts of God who at all times acts savingly on our behalf.<sup>11</sup>

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> O. Lamar Cope, "To the Close of the Age": The Role of Apocalyptic Thought in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. by Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989) 113-124.

<sup>2</sup> Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, trans. by J. Bradford Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1995) 117-132.

<sup>3</sup> The seven letters considered by the vast majority of scholars to have been authored by Paul are: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

<sup>4</sup> For treatments of Paul that argue for his intentional use of eschatological judgment motifs, that is, a use not at odds with his other main theological convictions and not merely an unreflective carryover from his pre-transformation Jewish heritage, see, e.g., David W. Kuck, *Judgment and Community Conflict: Paul's Use of Apocalyptic Judgment Language in 1 Corinthians 3:5-4:5* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992); Calvin J. Roetzel, *Judgement in the Community: A Study of the Relationship Between Eschatology and Ecclesiology in Paul* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972); Kent L. Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment According to Deeds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1988). For the argument that Paul also refers to the eschatological judgment in Galatians, see David W. Kuck, "Each Will Bear His Own Burden": Paul's Creative Use of an Apocalyptic Motif," *NTS* 40 (1994) 289-297. Kuck's argument is adopted by J. Louis Martyn in his *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> As we have seen, the twelve disciples of Jesus are portrayed as having a share in the judging activity of the Son of Man, but only at the last judgment, not before.

<sup>6</sup> This point is made by Frederick Dale Bruner in *Matthew: A Commentary, vol. 1* (Dallas: Word, 1987) 424. While Jesus does not directly warn outsiders of judgment, he clearly understands the final judgment to include all people, as indicated by his references to Tyre and Sidon, who will be judged, too.

<sup>7</sup> Cope, "To the Close of the Age," 117.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>11</sup> I wish to thank David Casson, Jeff Chandler, John Hartman, Stephen Oglesbee, and Dr. Ulrich Mauser for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. They are, of course, in no way responsible for its remaining shortcomings.

# ‘Hell’ as a Subordinate Clause: Spiritual Direction in the *Gehenna* Texts

by Matthew P. Ristuccia

*Abusus non tollit usum.<sup>1</sup>*

What if hell really does exist? That is a question I was able to ignore in my younger days. Growing up in a home that was nominally religious, I acquired a view of hell that I have since found to be common: the “hell-as-a-tool-for-behavior-modification” view. It ran something like this: “Hell is a myth that was employed by medieval priests who were dealing with illiterate and ignorant peasants. Because people couldn’t read, religious leaders lacked the resources we enjoy today to teach a much more reasonable faith: things like catechisms and books and Bible studies and vernacular music. So, instead, they had to resort to a vivid mythology, one that would appeal to primitive minds awash in ignorance. The priests soon discovered the power of pictures, especially those horrifying enough to be remembered and thus function as a constant check on behavior. Of course, among the most effective of these was the myth of hell.”

That is what I was taught. And I believed it. In fact, I did not question it at all until, at age nineteen, I opened a Bible for the first time and read the Gospel of Matthew. What happened at that time is better told later in this article. For now, I will let this first installment of my theological story serve as an approximation of the prevailing “truth” about hell in our culture.

One autobiographical note is appropriate here, however, lest my thoughts on questions of eternal destiny be construed as flippant or casual. I think and write about these issues as one against himself, as one who has come to believe in the orthodox view of hell on the basis of biblical and theological data but wishes the case were not so. As a pastor who has served for fifteen years and as one who has been given a sensitive

heart, I am acutely aware of the personal anguish entailed in believing in hell in real-life, real-time issues. My confidence, however, is in the sovereign grace of God as played out in the responses of human hearts.

Today, hell and its horrors are at best tolerated as historical artifacts, things to be understood only in order to understand something else: a painting, a novel, a sermon, a medieval motet. The consensus has an almost economic logic to it: were we to take hell and its horrors seriously, we would lose far too much in the bargain. God’s love, justice and mercy, as well as human freedom and dignity, seem to slip quickly through our fingers when we hold onto the doctrine of hell. So we remain ambivalent about hell in order to keep the market of more attractive theological considerations open.

But what have we lost in the exchange? What if hell does exist? What if those medieval priests, in spite of their limitations and weaknesses, were more enlightened than my Sunday school teacher on this point?

Though long passed on, the writer of Hebrews still speaks when he includes in his list of *the elementary teachings about Christ* an obvious reference to hell: *instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal punishment.*<sup>2</sup> In the writer’s mind, there is a foundational quality to the doctrine of hell that is beyond abandonment. In that same spirit, perhaps we do well to stop asking ourselves the question, what do we lose if we believe in hell? In its stead, or at least in the same breath, we should ask ourselves what we lose if we don’t believe in it.

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While this second question could (and should) stimulate a host of theological and biblical discussions, in this article I will concentrate on the damage done to spiritual direction when hell ceases to be a matter of concern for the church. I choose this subject because, though frequently overlooked, I am convinced it plays a central role in Jesus' references to hell, as recorded in the synoptic gospels.<sup>3</sup>

### *Hell in the Synoptics*

A glance at any concordance will reveal that the Synoptic Gospels have as much to say about hell as any portion of the New Testament. More precisely, they use what is arguably the strongest word for hell, *gehenna*, eleven of the twelve times that it appears in the New Testament. The Gospel of Matthew contains seven of the twelve occurrences. In Mark it is used three times, and in Luke only once.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the reason that the noun *gehenna* appears almost uniquely in the synoptics is because it occurs only in comments and sayings of Jesus. But what is more remarkable, especially a propos the argument of this article, is the way Jesus uses the noun. In each of the cases, the noun is used subordinately: technically, as the object of a preposition. Nowhere does one find a statement of Jesus with *gehenna* as its subject or its direct object or even as the head of a relative clause.

Consider the implications of this “subordinate” usage. Especially since the Enlightenment, it has been characteristic to ask a certain set of questions when dealing with a biblical text about hell.<sup>5</sup> Such questions include: does hell *really* exist? If so, where? What is its relation to Hades? How is it described? Is the text to be taken literally or figuratively? Does the text affirm that hell is everlasting or penal or irreversible or just? These are fair questions to ask of any text referencing so grave a subject.<sup>6</sup> There is, however, a problem with such questioning, and it must not be minimized if we are to allow the synoptics to speak to us on their own terms.<sup>7</sup> While such questions belong to us in our world, they did not belong in the same way to the world of the authors, hearers, and readers of the synoptics.

In fact, Jesus was taking on a different set of issues when he referenced *gehenna*. Hell was never the subject or the main clause or the topic sentence of any of his *gehenna* sayings. Rather, it was the subordinate clause, a concept introduced in order to drive other points home. It is these “other points” that the church has collected and contemplated through so much of its history. One could argue that the church was free to contemplate these “other points” only because it had not yet developed the theological reservations that so many have today. Be that as it may,

at one time the church had this freedom, which means that when we choose not to affirm the doctrine today, we lose more than the doctrine itself. We also lose the riches of serious contemplation and spiritual direction that the church has stored over the centuries. With a view to uncovering these riches, then, let us examine more precisely the *gehenna* texts and the connections Jesus makes in them.

### *Sources for Reflection: John the Baptist and Jesus*

The need for precision in handling the Jesus texts on can be demonstrated by deconstructing a prevalent caricature of John the Baptist. John is the *sine qua non* New Testament figure for a caricature of a hellfire and brimstone preacher. It is true that John made some strong statements about hell.<sup>8</sup> The Synoptics place greater emphasis, however, on John's preaching about heaven, than his preaching on hell. Matthew, the synoptic with more to say about than the other two combined, summarizes John's preaching as “repent, for the kingdom of *heaven* is at hand” (Mt. 3:1; italics added). Mark and Luke present a different summary, but one whose reference to hellfire and damnation is just as indirect: *John came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins* (Mk. 1:4; cp. Lk. 3:3).

The distortion of the synoptic emphasis on heaven and forgiveness caused by caricatures of John should alert us to the need for precision in dealing with the *gehenna* texts. We can now examine the way Jesus' thought has been equally, though in a different way, distorted.

### *Jesus on Gehenna and the Gravity of the Mundane*

We begin with Matthew 5:22 and 29-30 as a case in point. The texts, which use *gehenna* a total of three times (translated as “hell”), read as follows:

Anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

A popular study Bible offers little comment on Jesus' central exhortations here. Instead, the notes at the bottom discuss the origin and meaning of

*gehenna*. Such information, while helpful, is nonetheless subordinate to Jesus' main points. The net effect of the explanatory help is to draw attention away from the primary teaching of the passage. In doing so, the study Bible potentially reduces the texts in the mind of its readers to three more references having to do with *gehenna*. That they are, but not primarily.

Instead, they are strongly phrased appeals to something quite different. Jesus employs both the concept of *gehenna*, which he did not need to explain to his listeners, and the strong hyperbole of self-mutilation to help his audience rediscover the importance of the mundane. The moral choices that people make have eternal consequences, and yet we make too many of them with nonchalance. The habits of hand and eye, so everyday and ordinary, are no ordinary habits. They have bearing on issues of far greater significance than what appears, and therefore we are to take heed to them with the utmost care and resolve. To paraphrase a well-known passage of C. S. Lewis, there are no ordinary habits. All day long we are, in some degree, making choices that one day will shine with so great a glory such that, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.<sup>9</sup>

The very same emphasis lies at the heart of another of Jesus' references to hell, Matthew 25:41-49:<sup>10</sup>

Then [the King] will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I need clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me."

They also will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison and did not help you?"

He will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

*Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.*

In this familiar passage, note the ordinariness of the actions being scrutinized. Judgment here deals with very basic matters: eating, drinking, providing shelter, being clothed and assisting the oppressed. "There are no ordinary choices," and here that point stands out even more strongly than in the Matthew 5 texts previously considered. In the earlier text, the connection between eternal consequences and mundane activities can be lost in the midst of Jesus' star-

ting hyperbole. Here there is no exaggeration and the point is even more prominent. Furthermore, the question and answer exchange makes obvious what the listener or reader might otherwise miss, the unavoidable connection between our seemingly mundane choices and final judgment. Finally, the unnerving connection in the mind of Jesus between the mundane and the celestial is underscored by the "mundane" presence of the celestial judge. Jesus makes, after all, a reference to his own words when he puts into the mouth of the King at the final judgment, *depart from me*.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Church Reflection on Gehenna and the Gravity of the Mundane*

This connection between Jesus' subordinate use of *gehenna* and a serious appreciation of the significance of our choices has characterized pastoral reflection and direction throughout church history. Take, as an example, a seventeenth century work known subsequently as *Holy Living, Holy Dying*. The volume, a combination of two different treatises, was written approximately 1650 by a remarkable Anglican pastor, Jeremy Taylor. The spiritual direction presented in the work exemplifies a whole genre of writings now largely forgotten, that of the *momenta morae*. Taylor's book, perhaps the most articulate and insightful of such seventeenth century composi-

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---

tions, consists of practical appeals for preparing for a holy death. The title tells it all: for Taylor and so many of his contemporaries, spiritual formation meant living the holy mundane with a view to the holy celestial. They distinguished between *particular* preparation for death (i.e., facing an acute situation that may prove to be fatal) and *general* preparation (i.e., living every moment in light of judgment and the age to come). Hence the appeals: remember death, remember judgment, remember eternity. There are, again, no ordinary choices.

But a book about “holy dying” sounds like an anachronism in today’s world. Spiritual formation today has less to do with the world to come (even though that is exactly what Jesus is counseling in the texts above) than it has to do with results in the world of the present. Spiritual performativity, to hijack a deconstructionist term, is what sells today, and it sells because it is believed. But in believing this we have cut ourselves off from centuries of wisdom and spiritual insight handed onto us by the Church. In an odd reversal of the proverb, we have thrown out the bath water—a tradition of spiritual direction—with the baby—a serious engagement with the *gehenna* texts.

#### *Jesus on Gehenna and ‘Boundary Markers’*

One could argue that Jesus underscores the importance of the mundane as much in his references to heaven as in his references to *gehenna*. Fair enough, let us look at some other *gehenna* texts, and see how Jesus moves in a different direction. In these texts, Jesus aims to destroy ‘boundary markers’, outward signs of righteousness that falsely identify the people of God.<sup>12</sup>

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are (*Mt. 23:15*).

Leaving aside the questions that crowd the mind as far as what a “son of hell” might be, the thrust of the passage is the reversal of God’s blessing. The very leaders who were presumed sons of heaven are being identified and castigated as sons of hell. As with the leaders, so their practices: an association between *gehenna* and prominent religious activities is affirmed, not because of the inherent evil of the acts themselves but because of the corruption of those who performed them. So, deeds that were normally viewed as marks of righteousness are, in this case, deemed unreliable guides as to the real identity of the person. Jesus’ *gehenna* saying demolishes the reliability of outward marks of righteousness such as conversion zeal (in this verse) and, by extension to the verse that follows, legal scrupulousness. And he effects the demolition by an appeal to hell.

He achieves the same effect by a similar appeal to hell (although he does not use the term *gehenna*) earlier in Matthew’s gospel (8:10-12).

When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Both this passage and that in Matthew 23 make a similar connection.<sup>13</sup> In the present instance, a faith-response on the part of a Gentile (a Roman centurion no less) nicely contrasts the rejection-response of religious leaders denounced in Matthew 23. Common to both passages, however, is the theme of externals: the unreliability of outward marks of righteousness. Here, Jesus laments that he had failed to find anyone with as strong and as genuine a faith-submission as the centurion’s. In Matthew 23, he diagnoses those who had all the outward marks of righteousness as being corrupt, as lacking real faith, ready submission and heart godliness.

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*I have seen people of a shrunken  
God who is no longer worth fearing,  
an enfeebled judge in whose place has  
arisen an army of mundane fears.*

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In other words, in both Matthew 23 and Matthew 8 the allusion to hell is applied so as to uproot the boundary marker, so to speak. Jesus introduces the most extreme and disquieting of theological concepts in order to sever a set of connections so readily sustained among “the righteous.” Boundary markers that demarcate the people of God can lead to false security and, as such, are often unreliable. Those with outward reason to rest on their laurels and assume that all is well both now and forever after had best beware.

Jesus’ warning anticipates the New Testament thrust that the Old Testament boundary markers have been undone: dietary laws, tithing, Sabbath-keeping and others. To signal so profound a shift, he brings the doctrine of eternal punishment to bear on it, and on those who presumed themselves righteous.

#### *Church Reflection on Gehenna and Boundary Markers*

In line with Jesus’ own pattern, others have applied the doctrine of hell at the same point: to the presumed righteous as opposed to the flagrant sinner. So, for instance, in Romans 2 Paul answers the question “who are the true Jews?” by making the same connection. A confluence of recognizable themes distinguishes the chapter: the deceptiveness of boundary markers (2:17-20), the reality of judgment and eternal punishment (2:6-16), and a consequent redefining of the people of God (2:28-29).

Alerting the righteous to the dangers of boundary markers marked pastor Jonathan Edwards' sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. In it, he directed the doctrine of hell toward his own congregation with the same alarm-clock effect. His thrust was not hellfire and brimstone against the worst of sinners but instead a reveille to the complacent, the well-churched. Like Jesus and Paul before him, he allowed the doctrine to interrogate those who would have held others liable to hell while exempting themselves, and that simply because they possessed the necessary boundary markers of the time.

Centuries beforehand there lived one Augustine, bete-noire as far as the doctrine of hell goes. This reputation is in good part undeserved. No less an expert on Augustine than Peter Brown has observed that "the moments when Augustine stands outside his flock and threatens them in this way [i.e., with hell] are rare."<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, however, Augustine may receive a better hearing in light of this connection between *gehenna* and boundary markers.

We do well to remember Augustine first as a pastor and preacher, an initially reluctant shepherd who loved and was loved by his flock. Polemics and theology derived from this calling, and as such were afterthoughts, necessary footnotes to preserve and guard the people of God.<sup>15</sup> His writings contain jewels of wisdom for pastors, for he was one who lived his calling conscientiously, practicing the disciplines of prayer and fasting rigorously. And, as the following quotation demonstrates, he was one who saw his theology as subordinate to the well being of the Christian:

[True knowledge] is that by which the most wholesome faith that leads to true blessedness is begotten, nourished, defended and strengthened. And in this knowledge many of the faithful are weak, though in the faith itself they are most strong. For it is one thing to know what is to be believed for the attainment of the eternal life which alone is blessed; it is another, to know how this faith gives succor [i.e. help] to the godly<sup>16</sup>

So, on the one hand, Augustine could comfort his flock with such deeply moving words as these: "O God's own people, O body of Christ, O high-born race of foreigners on earth.... you do not belong here, you belong somewhere else."<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, as appropriate he could shake the conscience of the complacent, believing as he did that "it happens very rarely, indeed never, that someone comes wanting to be a Christian who has not been smitten by some fear of God."<sup>18</sup> In his case, one of the boundary markers of the age was that of church attendance. Hence, on the anniversary of his consecration as a bishop, he

challenged the boundary marker in spite of the joy of the occasion. Note, however, that he did so by including himself in the audience:

I do not care whether you expect some well-turned phrases today. It is my duty to give you due warning in citing the Scriptures. *Do not be slow to turn to the Lord, nor delay from day to day, for His wrath shall come when you know not.* God knows how I tremble on my bishop's throne when I hear that warning. I cannot be silent; I am forced to preach on it. Filled with fear myself, I fill you with fear.<sup>19</sup>

Any criticism of such an appeal that relegates Augustine to the status of killjoy, conjuring a dark cloud over the otherwise bright gathering at his anniversary, has minimized the deceptiveness of boundary markers. At least in this case, a conscientious pastor should not be cast in such a role.

#### *Jesus on Gehenna and Fear*

Of all the *gehenna* texts, Matthew 10:28 most explicitly subordinates the concept of hell. It reads: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." As in the preceding connection, Jesus is applying the concept of hell NOT to those outside the circle, but to those within; in fact, he applies it to those within the innermost circle, the twelve disciples.

Jesus' argument here involves a reversal. It works by a contrast. On the one hand, there are human enemies who might harm the body or at least threaten physical injury. On the other hand, there stands the Judge, the One who has the authority to destroy the entire person in *gehenna*. The logic of this contrast is easy to grasp, but its ramifications are not. Jesus is pushing the concept of hell in the opposite direction of so many post-enlightenment thinkers. Consider the flow of thought:

1. Jesus assumes something about hell (specifically, the overwhelming nature of its destruction) in order to ...

2. Affirm something about God (specifically, the sovereignty of his role as judge) in order to ...

3. Promote a certain affect in his listeners in response to God (specifically, an awe and reverent trust in him).

More often than not, modern discussions about hell jumble the order, with the result as follows:

1. One assumes a certain priority about God (e.g., that he is either too kind or too unknowable) in order to ...

2. Affirm something about hell (e.g., that it is a medieval or Augustinian notion worth shelving, or

that it is better to refrain from commenting on the matter) in order to ...

3. Promote a certain affect in those that listen (e.g., in the former case, distaste for the doctrine or for those who hold it; in the latter case, some sort of detached relief).

The reversal of nouns in the second series of thoughts (tagged by italics) uncovers a crucial apologetic issue: the danger of dismantling the received doctrine of hell. In doing so we are doubling Jesus' theology back upon itself and missing the point. As Cyril of Jerusalem counseled centuries ago, there is a seamless interconnectivity of doctrine (including that of final judgment) and we unravel it at our own peril.<sup>20</sup>

Even more important than the apologetic value of this text, however, is its pastoral weightiness. As in the other *gehenna* texts, Jesus has subordinated the concept of hell to something else: in this case, a personal response of fear and awe before God. And, as pedestrian as that observation may sound, it has nevertheless proven to be the starting point for a great tradition of spiritual guidance and reflection.

Matthew 10:28 occupies an important place in the writings of hesychasm, that set of disciplines and attitudes developed in the teachings of the desert fathers and spread over the centuries by the Byzantine tradition of the Church. The central emphasis of this ascetic tradition entailed growth in the contemplative life: specifically, pursuit of spiritual tranquillity and fitness of soul to still distracting thoughts and disturbing temptations (*logismoi*). Hence, Matthew 10:28, with its contrast of two fears, became a pattern text for meditation and spiritual exercise.

In his *Conferences* (c. 425), St. John Cassian provides an important summary of the ascetic instruction he had received in Egypt at the feet of various masters (abbas). In one text, he quotes Abba Moses, who spoke of the need to still *logismoi* and of tools of reflection to do so. Included in them is the doctrine of hell:

It is impossible for the mind not to be troubled by these thoughts. But if we exert ourselves it is within our power either to accept them and give them our attention, or to expel them. Their coming is not within our power, but their expulsion is.... When we meditate wisely and continually on the law of God, study psalms and canticles, engage in fastings and vigils, always bear in mind what is to come – the kingdom of heaven, the Gehenna of fire and all God's works – our wicked thoughts diminish and find no place.<sup>21</sup>

The passage fairly represents both the spirit of hesychasm and the place of meditation upon *Gehenna* in it.

A later writer in the hesychast tradition, Hesychios of Jerusalem, offered similar direction for quieting the soul. Notice how he expands the concept of holy fear more explicitly than John Cassian does to include both the fear of God and the fear of hell:

Watchfulness is a continual fixing and halting of thought at the entrance to the heart. In this way predatory and murderous thoughts are marked down as they approach and what they say and do is noted.... In one who is attempting to dam up the source of evil thoughts and actions, continuity of watchful attention in the intellect is produced by fear of hell and fear of God.<sup>22</sup>

A resurgence of interest in the writings from the ascetic tradition has occurred recently. Two recent volumes, both sharing the title *Spiritual Theology*, are signs of the times, as they provide introductions to the wealth of insight from the desert fathers.<sup>23</sup> So, in an ironic twist of church history, we are brought back in spite of ourselves to a *gehenna* text and the fear of God. All of which brings me back to where I started.

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*As in the other gehenna texts, Jesus has subordinated the concept of hell to something else: in this case, a personal response of fear and awe before God. And, as pedestrian as that observation may sound, it has nevertheless proven to be the starting point for a great tradition of spiritual guidance and reflection.*

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#### *Theological Irony in My Own Real-Time*

I have pointed out that in various synoptic texts Jesus connects *gehenna* to at least three issues of spiritual direction: the seriousness of our ordinary choices, the danger of boundary markers, and the role of fear in ordering our thoughts. My isolating the subordinate role of *gehenna* in Jesus' teaching is not to be construed, however, as saying that we can have the effect without the cause. Instead, my point is to highlight what we lose when we abandon the doctrine of hell, and therefore to open up the question asked

earlier, *what if hell really does exist?* The answer to that question impacts our view of ultimate reality and, as well, our life in the world today.

Take myself as a case in point. At age nineteen I was immersed in my own personal search for something beyond myself. Oddly, it was the fear of God that finally confronted me and gave me release. In an ironic twist, that confrontation occurred as I read the New Testament, a book I had largely forgotten. In fact, more than that, here was a book that I had previously written off as primitive, irrelevant and a waste of time. But in spite of myself, in spite of finely tuned theories of “hell-as-a-tool-for-behavior-modification,” something happened when I opened a Bible at age nineteen and started to read.

I admit that I opened the Bible with a desire to enjoy what others had as a result of what they called “their relationship with Christ.” There was a very strong experiential side to my interest. Perhaps that desire for some sort of experience was what opened me up enough not only to read the New Testament, but also to allow the question what if to enter my thoughts. What if Jesus really did exist? What if he really did miracles? What if he really died? What if he really rose from the dead? What if there really is a hell? These sorts of questions had at one time been unthinkable to me. But there was something attractive about the Christians I had met, and something salutary about the Jesus I read about, that allowed me the freedom to ask the what ifs.

And that is a good part of what I am saying as both a person and a pastor. The history of the church tells us that there is much to be lost in laying aside a doctrine of what Jesus called gehenna. Some time ago it was said that hell has disappeared and no one has noticed.<sup>24</sup> In time, however, in the real time of people’s lives, one can begin to notice what our society has lost. It has lost, not just a doctrine of hell, but Jesus’ connections based on that doctrine, the what ifs. If I may speak both pastorally and prophetically, I have seen, in the place of moral gravity, a trivializing of human choices. I have seen, in place of dismantled boundary markers, people obsessed with the status of this world, falling victim to a human order of exclusion and nouveau snobbery. I have seen people of a shrunken God who is no longer worth fearing, an enfeebled judge in whose place has arisen an army of mundane fears.

It is not that the church foresaw such repercussions and therefore believed in hell. The belief came first, and silently with it the very connections that Jesus made in the synoptics. In their gehenna texts, hell may have been the subordinate clause, but it is one without which the rest of the sentence makes no further sense.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Misuse of something is not reason enough to ban its usage.

<sup>2</sup>Hebrews 6:1-2. All biblical references, unless otherwise indicated, are from the NIV.

<sup>3</sup> The strengths and weaknesses of modern critical and exegetical methods will not be addressed in this article. Instead, in the spirit of Thomas C. Oden’s Introduction to Mark in the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Volume II, interaction with the recorded statements of Jesus will be based on “allowing the texts their own premises.” See Thomas Oden and Christopher Hall, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Mark* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), xxx.

<sup>4</sup> The Epistle of James contains the only non-synoptic use of gehenna: see 3:6.

<sup>5</sup> It is not that such questions or concerns were unknown before the Enlightenment. Tertullian, for instance, defends his doctrine of hell against those who rejected the notion that God would judge the world: see *Apologeticus*, XLVII, 12-14. Since the Enlightenment, the secularization of former “Christendom” has brought about a much more persistent and generally received dismissal of the notion.

<sup>6</sup> Given this disequilibrium and the diversity of theological responses to it, a definition of the term “hell” is in order, and one that, for purposes of this paper, will not distract from the central arguments proposed here. Brief is best, so understand that the term is being used here to speak of “the eternal consequences of divine justice upon the wicked.”

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 4.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Matthew 3:7-10.

<sup>9</sup> See C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Although technically the passage does not use the noun gehenna, it does invoke the same imagery as elsewhere in Jesus’ sayings.

<sup>11</sup> Compare Mt. 25:41 with 7:23.

<sup>12</sup> The phrase is original to James G. Dunn. See J.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Bible Commentary Volume 38 (Dallas, Word Books, 1988), pages lxiv and following.

<sup>13</sup> The Matthew 8 passage does not use the noun gehenna. Hence, the imagery of hell differs from that of many gehenna texts. In stead of fire and worm, it involves exclusion and darkness. Since gehenna was a reference to a garbage dump located outside Jerusalem in the Valley of Hinnom, images of fire and worms would suggest themselves. But, as here, Jesus did not limit himself to one particular figure of speech in discussing hell. For information on the origin of the term gehenna, see Gerhard Kittel, editor, *TDNT: Volume I* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 657-658.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 250. Italics are added.

<sup>15</sup> Note, for example, Brown’s discussion of Augustine as a cosmopolitan manqué. See Brown, *Augustine*, 271.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, “On the Trinity,” in John Burnaby, editor, *Augustine: Later Works* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 99-100.

<sup>17</sup> In his sermon on Psalm 136:13. Quoted in Brown, *Augustine*, 314.

<sup>18</sup> Sermon on Psalm 149:14 and 85:17. Quoted in Brown, *Augustine*, 249.

<sup>19</sup> Brown, *Augustine*, 250.

<sup>20</sup> See his “Catechetical Lectures” as quoted in Thomas C. Oden, *Classical Pastoral Care*, Volume 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 173-174.

<sup>21</sup> Found in Palmer, Sherrard and Ware, translators and editors, *The Philokalia: Volume One* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1979), 97.

<sup>22</sup> Palmer, Sherrard, Ware, *Philokalia*, 163.

<sup>23</sup> See Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology* (Cambridge, MA : Cowley Publications, 1997). Also, Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Attributed to Martin Marty, 1985.

# Preaching Hell in a Tolerant Age: Brimstone for the Broadminded

by Tim Keller

The young man in my office was impeccably dressed and articulate. He was an Ivy League MBA, successful in the financial world, and had lived in three countries before age 30. Raised in a family with only the loosest connections to a mainline church, he had little understanding of Christianity. I was therefore gratified to learn of his intense spiritual interest, recently piqued as he attended our church. He said he was ready to embrace the gospel. But there was a final obstacle.

"You've said that if we do not believe in Christ," he said, "we are lost and condemned. I'm sorry, I just cannot buy that. I work with some fine people who are Muslim, Jewish, or agnostic. I cannot believe they are going to hell just because they don't believe in Jesus. In fact, I cannot reconcile the very idea of hell with a loving God--even if he is holy too."

This young man expressed what may be the main objection contemporary secular people make to the Christian message. (A close second, in my experience, is the problem of suffering and evil.) Moderns reject the idea of final judgment and hell.

Thus, it's tempting to avoid such topics in our preaching. But neglecting the unpleasant doctrines of the historic faith will bring about counter-intuitive consequences. There is an ecological balance to scriptural truth that must not be disturbed. If an area is rid of its predatory or undesirable animals, the balance of that environment may be so upset that the desirable plants and animals are lost--through overbreeding with a limited food supply. The nasty predator that was eliminated actually kept in balance the number of other animals and plants necessary to that particular ecosystem. In the same way, if we play down "bad" or harsh doctrines within the historic Christian faith, we will find, to our shock, that we have gutted all our pleasant and comfortable beliefs, too.

The loss of the doctrine of hell and judgment and the holiness of God does irreparable damage to our deepest comforts--our understanding of God's grace and love and of our human dignity and value

to him. To preach the good news, we must preach the bad. But in this age of tolerance, how?

## *How to preach hell to traditionalists*

Before preaching on the subject of hell, I must recognize that today, a congregation is made up of two groups: traditionalists and postmoderns. The two hear the message of hell completely differently. People from traditional cultures and mindsets tend to have (a) a belief in God, and (b) a strong sense of moral absolutes and the obligation to be good. These people tend to be older, from strong Catholic or religious Jewish backgrounds, from conservative evangelical/Pentecostal Protestant backgrounds, from the southern U. S., and first-generation immigrants from non-European countries.

The way to show traditional persons their need for the gospel is by saying, "Your sin separates you from God! You can't be righteous enough for him." Imperfection is the duty-worshiper's horror. Traditionalists are motivated toward God by the idea of punishment in hell. They sense the seriousness of sin. But traditionalists may respond to the gospel only out of fear of hell, unless I show them Jesus experienced not only pain in general on the cross but hell in particular. This must be held up until they are attracted to Christ for the beauty of the costly love of what he did. To the traditional person, hell must be preached as the only way to know how much Christ loved you.

Here is one way I have preached this:

"Unless we come to grips with this terrible doctrine, we will never even begin to understand the depths of what Jesus did for us on the cross. His body

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was being destroyed in the worst possible way, but that was a flea bite compared to what was happening to his soul. When he cried out that his God had forsaken him, he was experiencing hell itself.

"If a mild acquaintance denounces you and rejects you--that hurts. If a good friend does the same--the hurt's far worse. However, if your spouse walks out on you, saying, 'I never want to see you again,' that is far more devastating still. The longer, deeper, and more intimate the relationship, the more torturous is any separation."

"But the Son's relationship with the Father was beginning-less and infinitely greater than the most intimate and passionate human relationship. When Jesus was cut off from God, he went into the deepest pit and most powerful furnace, beyond all imagining. And he did it voluntarily, for us."

### *How to Preach Hell to Postmoderns*

In contrast to the traditionalist, the postmodern person is hostile to the very idea of hell. People with more secular and postmodern mindsets tend to have (a) only a vague belief in the divine, if at all, and (b) little sense of moral absolutes, but rather a sense they need to be true to their dreams. They tend to be younger, from nominal Catholic or non-religious Jewish backgrounds, from liberal mainline Protestant backgrounds, from the western and northeastern U. S., and Europeans.

When preaching hell to people of this mindset, I've found I must make four arguments.

1.) Sin is slavery. I do not define sin as just breaking the rules, but also as "making something besides God our ultimate value and worth." These good things, which become gods, will drive us relentlessly, enslaving us mentally and spiritually, even to hell forever if we let them.

I say, "You are actually being religious, though you don't know it--you are trying to find salvation through worshiping things that end up controlling you in a destructive way." Slavery is the choice-worshiper's horror.

C. S. Lewis's depictions of hell are important for postmodern people. In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis describes a busload of people from hell who come to the outskirts of heaven. There they are urged to leave behind the sins that have trapped them in hell. The descriptions Lewis makes of people in hell are so striking because we recognize the denial and self-delusion of substance addictions. When addicted to alcohol, we are miserable, but we blame others and pity ourselves; we do not take responsibility for our behavior nor see the roots of our problem.

Lewis writes, "Hell . . . begins with a grumbling mood, and yourself still distinct from it: perhaps even criticizing it. . . . You can repent and come out of it again. But there may come a day when you can do

that no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine."

Modern people struggle with the idea of God thinking up punishments to inflict on disobedient people. When sin is seen as slavery, and hell as the freely chosen, eternal skid row of the universe, hell becomes much more comprehensible.

Here is an example from a recent sermon of how I try to explain this:

"First, sin separates us from the presence of God (Isa. 59:2), which is the source of all joy (Ps. 16:11), love, wisdom, or good thing of any sort (James 1:17). . . Second, to understand hell we must understand sin as slavery. Romans 1:21-25 tells us that we were built to live for God supremely, but instead we live for love, work, achievement, or morality to give us meaning and worth. Thus every person, religious or not, is worshiping something--idols, pseudo-saviors--to get their worth. But these things enslave us with guilt (if we fail to attain them) or anger (if someone blocks them from us) or fear (if they are threatened) or drivenness (since we must have them). Guilt, anger, and fear are like fire that destroys us. Sin is worshiping anything but Jesus--and the wages of sin is slavery."

"Perhaps the greatest paradox of all is that the people on Lewis's bus from hell are enslaved because they freely choose to be. They would rather have their freedom (as they define it) than salvation. Their relentless delusion is that if they glorified God, they would lose their human greatness (Gen. 3:4-5), but their choice has really ruined their human greatness. Hell is, as Lewis says, 'the greatest monument to human freedom.'"

2.) Hell is less exclusive than so-called tolerance. Nothing is more characteristic of the modern mindset than the statement: "I think Christ is fine, but I believe a devout Muslim or Buddhist or even a good atheist will certainly find God." A slightly different version is: "I don't think God would send a person who lives a good life to hell just for holding the wrong belief." This approach is seen as more inclusive.

In preaching about hell, then, I need to counter this argument: "The universal religion of humankind is: We develop a good record and give it to God, and then he owes us. The gospel is: God develops a good record and gives it to us, then we owe him (Rom. 1:17). In short, to say a good person, not just Christians, can find God is to say good works are enough to find God.

"You can believe that faith in Christ is not necessary or you can believe that we are saved by grace, but you cannot believe in both at once. So the apparently inclusive approach is really quite exclusive. It says, 'The good people can find God, and the bad people do not.'

"But what about us moral failures? We are excluded. The gospel says, 'The people who know they aren't good

can find God, and the people who think they are good do not.' Then what about non-Christians, all of whom must, by definition, believe their moral efforts help them reach God? They are excluded.

"So both approaches are exclusive, but the gospel's is the more inclusive exclusivity. It says joyfully, 'It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. It doesn't matter if you've been at the gates of hell. You can be welcomed and embraced fully and instantly through Christ.'"

3.) Christianity's view of hell is more personal than the alternative view. Fairly often, I meet people who say, "I have a personal relationship with a loving God, and yet I don't believe in Jesus Christ at all."

"Why?" I ask.

They reply, "My God is too loving to pour out infinite suffering on anyone for sin."

But then a question remains: "What did it cost this kind of God to love us and embrace us? What did he endure in order to receive us? Where did this God agonize, cry out? Where were his nails and thorns?"

The only answer is: "I don't think that was necessary." How ironic. In our effort to make God more loving, we have made God less loving. His love, in the end, needed to take no action. It was sentimentality, not love at all. The worship of a God like this will be impersonal, cognitive, ethical. There will be no joyful self-abandonment, no humble boldness, no constant sense of wonder. We would not sing to such a being, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

The postmodern "sensitive" approach to the subject of hell is actually quite impersonal. It says, "It doesn't matter if you believe in the person of Christ, as long as you follow his example." But to say that is to say the essence of religion is intellectual and ethical, not personal. If any good person can find God, then the essential core of religion is understanding and following the rules. When preaching about hell, I try to show how impersonal this view is:

"To say that any good person can find God is to create a religion without tears, without experience, without contact. The gospel certainly is not less than the understanding of truths and principles, but it is infinitely more. The essence of salvation is knowing a Person (John 17:3). As with knowing any person, there is repenting and weeping and rejoicing and encountering. The gospel calls us to a wildly passionate, intimate love relationship with Jesus Christ, and calls that 'the core of true salvation.'"

4. There is no love without wrath. What rankles people is the idea of judgment and the wrath of God: "I can't believe in a God who sends people to suffer eternally. What kind of loving God is filled with wrath?" So in preaching about hell, we must explain

that a wrathless God cannot be a loving God. Here's how I tried to do that in one sermon:

"People ask, 'What kind of loving God is filled with wrath?' But any loving person is often filled with wrath. In *Hope Has Its Reasons*, Becky Pippert writes, 'Think how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or relationships. Do we respond with benign tolerance as we might toward strangers? Far from it. . . . Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference.' Pippert then quotes E. H. Gifford, 'Human love here offers a true analogy: the more a father loves his son, the more he hates in him the drunkard, the liar, the traitor.' She concludes: 'If I, a flawed narcissistic sinful woman, can feel this much pain and anger over someone's condition, how much more a morally perfect God who made them? God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer of sin which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being.'"

### A God Like This

Following a recent sermon on the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, the post-service question-and-answer session was packed with more than the usual number of attenders. The questions and comments focused on the subject of eternal judgment. My heart sank when a young college student said, "I've gone to church all my life, but I don't think I can believe in a God like this." Her tone was more sad than defiant, but her willingness to stay and talk showed that her mind was open.

Usually all the questions are pitched to me, and I respond as best I can. But on this occasion people began answering one another. An older businesswoman said, "Well, I'm not much of a churchgoer, and I'm in some shock now. I always disliked the very idea of hell, but I never thought about it as a measure of what God was willing to endure in order to love me."

Then a mature Christian made a connection with a sermon a month ago on Jesus at Lazarus' tomb in John 11. "The text tells us that Jesus wept," he said, "yet he was also extremely angry at evil. That's helped me. He is not just an angry God or a weeping, loving God--he's both. He doesn't only judge evil, but he also takes the hell and judgment himself for us on the cross."

The second woman nodded, "Yes. I always thought hell told me about how angry God was with us, but I didn't know it also told me about how much he was willing to suffer and weep for us. I never knew how much hell told me about Jesus' love. It's very moving."

It is only because of the doctrine of judgment and hell that Jesus' proclamation of grace and love are so brilliant and astounding.

# Reviews

## *The Case for Conditional Immortality*

by John Wenham

(This article appeared in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, Nigel M. de S. Cameron, ed.)

Reviewed by Benjamin Milner

Many Christians find themselves unable to believe that human beings who do not know God will enter an everlasting state of conscious torment after death. At the same time, many of these people are unable to believe that the biblical warnings about hell are a mere excess of apocalyptic frenzy. For such Christians, the doctrine of annihilationism is an attractive middle ground. Also known as conditional immortality, this is the view that human beings are not inherently immortal, but are only granted eternal life through the grace of Jesus Christ. Therefore, anyone who does not know the grace of Christ, instead of existing forever in continual torment, is simply annihilated – literally eliminated from existence. Does this compromise come with any biblical warrant? Can the uneasy believer, desiring to ground her beliefs in the biblical witness, find any witness for annihilationism? John Wenham, in an essay entitled ‘The Case for Conditional Immortality,’ argues that the Bible not only warrants a belief in annihilationism but fairly demands it.

According to Wenham, the doctrine of final judgment does not make an emphatic appearance in the Old Testament. Wenham refers to Edward Fudge (an annihilationist himself) who claims that “the Old Testament utilizes some fifty Hebrew words and seventy-five figures of speech to describe the ultimate end of the wicked – and every one sounds...like total extinction.”<sup>1</sup> Wenham is convinced that the New Testament agrees in its consensus opinion about the matter of final judgment. According to Wenham, there are 264 references to the fate of the lost in the New Testament. Of these 264 references, ten<sup>2</sup>(4%) refer to a heap outside Jerusalem where trash was burned, fifteen (6%) depict great anguish, twenty six<sup>3</sup> (10%) refer to some kind of burning, fifty-nine<sup>4</sup> (22%) involve the idea of utter destruction, twenty<sup>5</sup> refer (8%) to separation from God, twenty-five (10%) to “death in its finality”<sup>6</sup>, and one hundred and eight (40%) refer to “adverse judgment in which the penalty is not specified.”<sup>7</sup>

The first thing that ought to impress the reader about this list is its sheer size. The numerous references to this general topic of destruction in the New Testament are as nuanced in their particularity of detail as they are consistent in their affirmation of judgment. It is obviously a topic that these writers addressed with utmost seriousness. These are not best guesses about what happens to the lost after death.

Among these references, we hear of “the Gehenna of fire” in Mt. 5:22. Gehenna, the trash heap outside Jerusalem where rubbish was destroyed, is called “unquenchable fire” three times in the ninth chapter of Mark. Mt. 3:12 speaks of chaff (a metaphor for the wicked) being burned in that “unquenchable fire.” Mt. 13:40 talks about weeds being “collected and burned up with fire” and Mt. 13:42 adds that in “the furnace of fire...there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Extending the metaphor of burning, Heb. 6:8 refers to worthless, cursed things whose “end is to be burned over” and Heb. 10:27 speaks of “a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.” In Rev. 21:8 we find a picture of a “lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” Also of note in these many verses is the repetition of the word “destruction.” Thus, Mt. 7:13 speaks of “the gate that leads to destruction”; 2 Pet. 3:7 refers to the “destruction of the godless”, Phil. 1:28 mentions the “evidence of their destruction”, and 2 Thes. 1:9 imagines the “punishment of eternal destruction” as being “separated from the presence of the Lord.” What I have presented here is a mere preview of the New Testament references to fire, burning, great loss, separation, and destruction. The list above contains many more.

Annihilationists like Wenham happily find something like congruence between their views and these verses. The images provoked by these New Testament references are surprisingly consistent in their advocacy of annihilationism, cutting across the various interpretive traditions found in the New Testament. One is tempted to agree with Wenham that the burning of trash, the vocabulary of utter separation and destruction, the image of fire consuming matter, and the motif of second death are more coherent in the framework of annihilationism, than in a framework of eternal punishment. The key note seems to be that evil will be ultimately punished by being ultimately eradicated.

Certainly, there are problems with Wenham's statistical methodology of drawing meaning out of scripture. One would not want to construct a systematic theology based on a massive computational analysis of scripture. Nevertheless, one is rightly astonished to discover such a deep strain of annihilationism in the New Testament. For me, at least, the unexpected consistency of annihilationism in these texts was something of a theological shock. But are there any New Testament texts among these 246 which are less consistent with an annihilationist interpretation? Given the polyphonic, multidimensional nature of scripture, one rightly expects that there must be.

Mt. 25:46 speaks of the "eternal punishment" of the wicked contrasted with the "eternal life" of the righteous. In Mt. 18:8 and 25:41, we are presented with the image of the wicked marching into "eternal fire." There is mention of the infamous "eternal sin" against the Holy Spirit in Mk. 3:29, and 2 Thes. 1:9 speaks of those who "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord." Hebrews 6:2 mentions "eternal judgment", and the seventh and thirteenth verses of Jude point to "punishment of eternal fire", and "nether gloom of darkness...reserved for ever." Three times "unquenchable fire" is mentioned (Mt. 3:12, Luke 3:17, Mk. 9:43), and there are two passages in Revelation (19:3 and 20:10) which speak of the devil being tormented forever with accompanying smoke. The eternality of the punishment, fire, sin, judgment, and gloom described in these verses has to be troubling to the honest annihilationist.

Finally, there is the terrifying image presented in the fourteenth chapter of the book of Revelation: "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name." Of all the images of judgment, this seems to be the most difficult for an annihilationist to square with her views. Wenham refers to John Stott in his attempt to deal with Rev. 14:11, "but as Stott points out, the torment experienced 'in the presence of the holy angels and...the Lamb' seems to refer to the moment of judgment, not to the eternal state."<sup>8</sup> I will leave it to the reader to decide for herself whether Stott's reading is ad hoc and questionable. Wenham points out that the overwhelming majority of 'annihilationist texts' must be kept in mind when reading these problematic texts.

I have included many of Wenham's biblical references in the footnotes so that the reader might consider within herself what these might mean. Obviously, each should be read in proper context of the book in which it appears (and not as though sus-

pended in a timeless vacuum). I close this essay with neither an attempted reconciliation of tension in the New Testament witness to final judgment, nor with an apologetic for annihilationism. Instead, I will make two humble comments. First, annihilationism is not a new doctrine created by sentimental, 20th century theologians who cannot stand the idea of God's judgment. As Wenham argues, it is simply not historically accurate to say that endless torment was "the view of Jesus, and the Jews of his day, of the New Testament writers and Fathers of the Church, of the Reformers and all Bible-believers, and never seriously questioned till the 20th century."<sup>9</sup> Second, there is one thing upon which all of Wenham's 264 New Testament references agree. All readers can agree that these New Testament texts converge in the assurance that there is final judgment. The New Testament contains a frightening multitude of texts describing the uncompromising judgment of God on some human beings. It seems to me that the relatively few references to Universalism that we find in the New Testament (mostly in the Pauline corpus) must be tempered by and read in light of the clearer, more numerous references to terrible judgment for some. Whether that judgment is eternal torture or annihilation, it must be acknowledged that its sober truth bursts through the pages of the New Testament with uncomfortably consistent vigor.

<sup>1</sup> Fudge, Edward, *Resurrection* 93 (Fall, 1990), p.4.

<sup>2</sup> Mt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:33; Mk. 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5.

<sup>3</sup> Mt. 3:7, 12; 7:19; 13:40, 42, 50; 18:8f; 25:41. Mk. 9:43, 48f. Luke 3:7, 17. 1 Cor. 3:13. 2 Thes. 1:7. Heb. 6:8; 10:27; 12:29. 2Pet. 3:7, 10. Jude 7, 23. Rev. 20:14f; 21:8.

<sup>4</sup> Mt. 7:13, 27; 10:6, 28, 39; 15:13; 16:25f; 21:41, 44; 22:7. Mk. 8:35f; 12:9. Luke 6:49; 9:25; 13:3, 7; 17:29, 33; 19:10, 27; 20:18. Jn. 3:16, 36; 6:39; 12:25. Acts 2:25, 31; 13:41. Rom. 2:12; 9:22, 29; 14:15. 1 Cor. 1:18; 10:10; 15:18. 2 Cor. 2:15; 4:3. Phil. 1:28; 3:19. 1 Thes. 5:3. 2 Thes. 1:9; 2:8, 10. 1 Tim. 6:9. Heb. 10:39. Jas 4:12. 2 Pet. 2:1, 3, 12; 3:7, 9, 16. 1 Jn. 2:17. Jude 5, 10f.

<sup>5</sup> Mt. 7:21; 8:12; 10:32; 22:13; 25:30, 41, 46. Mk. 8:38; 10:15. Lk. 12:9; 13:27f; 14:21, 34; 16:26; 17:34. Jn. 15:6. Eph. 5:5. 2 Thes. 1:9. Rev. 22:15.

<sup>6</sup> Wenham, John, 'The Case for Conditional Immortality,' in Nigel M. de S. Cameron, ed., *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993) p.173.

<sup>7</sup> Wenham, p.174.

<sup>8</sup> Wenham, p.179-180.

<sup>9</sup> Wenham, p.181.

## Hollywood's Pseudo-apocalypse: Advice to a Young Screenwriter

by Matthew Koenig

*The camera pans to a man sitting on a sofa: flashing blue and white light from a television reflects on his forehead. Close up on his eyes, flicking back and forth, then the object of his gaze: not the television, a book. Cut to the television screen: a glowing meteor sears through the atmosphere, slams into the Atlantic, a 1,000 foot wave rising. Back to the man: frantically turning pages, tracing finger along lines. To the television: head of the Statue of Liberty tumbling over debris, sinking to the bottom of what is now a new ocean floor. To the man: At last! He has found the sought-after text. To the text: crinkly parchment, an ancient font, "The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned to blood, a third of the living creatures of the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed" (Rev 8:8).*

An aspiring young screenplay writer sent this segment to the PTR some time ago, seeking our counsel about his new thriller in which a minister tries to find parallels between the apocalyptic imagery in the Bible and recent Hollywood movies. There's a host of movies cropping up, he explained, in which the end of the world is a focal point: look at *Titanic*, which, if not the end of the world, was at least the end of an age; then there's *End of Days*, which has a distinctly religious twist, as Arnold Schwarzenegger must fight to restrain the devil before he can copulate with his chosen mistress and cause the world untold evil; and check out *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*, both of which tell the story of a meteor slamming into the earth and wiping out mankind (in the scene above the minister watches *Deep Impact*).

In an effort to assist, I watched these movies, and thought I would share with our readers some of what I shared with him. I didn't spend long on *Titanic*, which has already had too much press (though I might add that for all James Cameron's supposed attention to historical accuracy, there's a surprising dearth of religious conversation for people drowning in 1913). Now *End of Days* is simply a bad movie, though it's more palatable if you consider its priorities: the goal is to pit muscled Arnold against a menacing superhuman villain, à la *T2* and *Predator*, and the insults to the Catholic church and anyone who has ever opened the book of Revelation are therefore tangential. But *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* merit some consideration, if only because Hollywood rarely releases two movies with the same plot within a couple months of each other.

If you haven't seen either *Armageddon* or *Deep Impact*, just pick one. They're essentially the same movie. Both feature meteors on a collision course with the

earth, and both devise the same means to stop it—rocket up a team to intercept the bugger, drill a hole into its bowels, drop an atomic bomb and . . . whamo! Problem solved. Also, both pull the same emotional strings for added suspense and pathos: not only is the history of the world at stake, but budding teen-aged romances as well. Plus, you'll never guess this, in both movies the initial plan doesn't work, and they have to improvise. The real difference comes in the musical scores. It's a question of whether you would rather watch New York City blasted away to a screeching Aerosmith soundtrack or a sappy James Horner mini-series symphony.

All things considered, I have to give the nod to *Deep Impact*. Watching *Armageddon* is like watching over two straight hours of MTV, which may not be a feat for some, but it's enough to make me queasy (*Blair Witch* at least has an excuse for making you seasick—they only had two cameras. But Michael Bay and Jerry Bruckheimer have no excuse. They make you sick with two hundred cameras, none of which holds an image for more than a half second). Anyway, when my day comes, I'd rather put my stock in president Morgan Freeman and seasoned starship pilot Robert Duvall than maverick oil driller Bruce Willis, who can't even fake an accent consistently through the movie, let alone drill the hole that will ensure my survival. Plus, Freeman does his sound-bite prayers with a lot more earnest conviction than Willis.

So, my advice for the screenplay writer? After thinking over *Impact* and *Armageddon* and other "apocalyptic" films of late, my advice is to nix the thriller motif. Instead, make your movie a mystery. The plot should weave together the following two puzzles: first, why is it that Hollywood will not cash in on the rewards of true biblical apocalyptic? The key to biblical apocalyptic is that it reveals something. The Greek word *Αποκαλύψισ*, from which *Apocalypse* derives, literally means *disclosure*, or *revelation*. The only reason we associate apocalypse with strange creatures and cataclysmic destruction is because John's *Apocalypse* (the book of Revelation) has been so influential, and it happens to have these characteristics. But for John, the strange events and imagery are not ultimately the point. The spirals of thrones, the flashes of lightning, the peals of thunder, the blazing lamps, and all the creatures covered in eyes and wings are certainly interesting, but not nearly as exciting as what stands at the center of this adulation: a slain Lamb, praised because with his blood he "purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). The point of John's *Apocalypse* is the revelation of God.

So, can we even call this latest round of films apocalyptic? What exactly do they reveal? The resilience of

the human spirit? The ability of the human race to survive despite horrific odds? How self-sacrifice is necessary to save others (alas, neither Bruce Willis nor Robert Duvall make it back alive)? Ah, but this is all old hat. Even the great threat—that this present earth might perish—is less exciting than the biblical alternative—that God’s plan for the world would come to its completion, that the old order would pass away and the new would come. As we conclude in the Nicene Creed: “We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

The other mystery is this: why has the church ceded its great resources to Hollywood? Maybe Hollywood raconteurs are missing the ultimate point, but they at least know the makings of a good story when they see one. The church shies away from exaggerated creatures and freaky pyrotechnics because they are scary. Hollywood devours them because they are captivating. A bizarre turn of events for a young screenwriter to make a story out of: the church scratches her head wondering how we can believe this stuff. Hollywood steals the material and charges \$8 a head to make people believe this stuff, at least for a few hours.

*A Royal “Waste” of Time, The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*  
by Marva J. Dawn. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1999, 370 pages.

Reviewed by Robbie F. Castleman  
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Marva Dawn’s second book on congregational worship, *A Royal Waste of Time*, responds to both the applause and objections raised by her *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* (Eerdmans, 1995). Dawn succeeds on several points and fails on a few. Whether you are “high liturgy”, “low liturgy”, “blended liturgy” or “whatever liturgy”, this book is well worth reading. It is passionate, quotable—if a bit self-promoting in spots. Its strength is asking the right questions about why we do what we do when we gather as the Church for the worship of God.

The *why* of worship is the heart beat of this book. Dawn only comments on the *what* of worship when it bears on this first concern. I don’t always agree with her conclusions, but she is asking the right questions, pushing us in the right direction. In a chapter titled, “Keeping God as the Infinite Center of Our Worship” she asks,

Does the order of worship clearly reflect that God is the Subject? Is there too much focus on the pastor or musicians that would detract from participants’ awareness that God is the inviter? . . . Is the God portrayed by our worship the biblical God of Abraham and Sarah, Jesus and Mary? Does our worship focus one-sidedly on comfortable aspects of God’s character, such as his mercy and love, without the dialectical balancing of his holiness and wrath?

Marva Dawn has written self-consciously counter-North American middle-class mostly-white-culture books on worship. She passionately resists the influence of the media, especially the omnipresent television, on worship. She laments,

[T]he development of perfect sound tracks has caused many worshipers to be dissatisfied now with merely human musicians who make mistakes, with less than professional-sounding choirs, with preachers who stumble occasionally, with the nitty-gritty of genuine community life. . . . If television is causing people to be dissatisfied with the worship of our churches, should we change worship to be more like television—or should the splendor of our worship cause people to ask better questions about television?

One point Dawn makes early in the book is the power of God-focused worship to actually convert the human soul. Marva Dawn concedes a place for seeker-services, just don’t call them worship services. Worship is God-sensitive, and often discomforts those present. It is not a time to build comfort-zones for either believers or non-believers.

Dawn resists the shopper’s mentality in the design of worship services and states it is “utterly dangerous for churches to offer choices of worship styles” (the italic emphasis is hers!). I’m a bit puzzled, however, at the latitude extended to her own congregation who (in a footnote to one of her sermons included in the book) “avoided” the problem of “dividing according to taste” by diversifying its music styles on alternate weeks. Choice is eliminated on a given Sunday, since the services are the same, but does this really eliminate choosing or preference? To her credit, part of her goal is to include an ethnic diversity in music styles which honors the Biblical idea of being “church for the world”. Still, this concession exposes some of the conclusions (not so much her basic argument!) that I found myself resisting.

The idea of a truly “blended” service Dawn either dismisses or has not experienced in a way that satisfies her. A service that incorporates diverse musical and liturgical elements may be difficult for a worship planning team to actually design, especially week after week, but it can be done. So, I affirm Dawn’s caution in creating congregations who divide along lines of

musical preference, but I think a challenge needs to be made that any one "style" of worship is more pleasing to God than another if it is focused on His pleasure.

It is notable that in several places throughout the book Dawn worries over the critics of her first book that labeled her "elitist". She doesn't want to be, but there may be cause for such assessment, and there are a few places where the author's collar was a bit "tight" for my less elite neck. For instance, to discipline the preacher and help the church function as a global faith community, Dawn argues that preaching texts come only from the lectionary. But she completely ignores the "canon within the canon" that rigid use of the lectionary lends itself to, as well as the richness that comes when the lectionary is set aside and an entire book is preached exegetically.

Another stark example is Dawn's consideration of "Advent". In her avid resistance to the enculturation of Christmas by consumerism, she says, "The Church reserves Christmas music for the twelve days of Christmas in order to retain...the highlighting of Christmas as the festival for which we have been *waiting*." (italics in the original) Personally, I like to sing "Joy to the World" in July if the congregation is celebrating the reign of Christ in a service of worship. Actually, I think Marva Dawn would agree with me, but at times her fervor to make worship what she *knows* it should be turns into a stridency to make worship what she *prefers* it to be, and this is one of the selfish sins of worship she is hoping to banish.

For Dawn, "...worship in the Christian heritage always begins with the invocation, 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'" In the context of this comment, she is not confined to the early development of the historical liturgy of the church—her verb is present tense, "begins" and she means this for now, every Sunday, every service. I think you can worship the triune God well with a variety of invocations.

But you don't have to join hands with Marva Dawn at every point to appreciate her vivacious call to make God the Infinite Center of every service of worship. And I think her appreciation of a well-developed liturgy, even if a bit too "high" at points for me, is timely for the college students I work with in InterVarsity, who are returning in increasing numbers to churches that actually sing hymns, don't de-ritualize the Eucharist, and proclaim historic creeds! My son, now a youth pastor in a mainline church with an evangelical congregation, recently wrote a column for his church's newsletter on worship.

Marva Dawn would like what 23 year old Scott wrote: "A worship service is not about what we get or don't get out of it. Are we glorifying God in our wor-

ship? That needs to be our main concern....a worship service is not a time to sit down and soak up. A sanctuary is not a Holy Spirit tanning bed.

*A Royal "Waste" of Time* is a book about understanding "why we do what we do when the Church worships", and it's not sitting down and soaking! It's really "being Church" for a world that needs to be awestruck by the majesty of the Triune God.

*Is Life Sacred?*, by Geoffrey G. Drutchas, Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press, 1998.

Reviewed by Terry Schlossberg

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This first book of Geoffrey G. Drutchas contends that the sanctity of life position is erroneously attributed to Christian faith, and that the church's pursuit of the sanctity of life imperils its unity and has become a justification for violence. Drutchas's objective is to show that what he calls the sanctity of life doctrine developed out of Stoicism and the Enlightenment rather than Christianity. He wants to offer readers an alternative "respect for life" perspective which is both more consonant with Christian tradition and more realistic and responsive to circumstances of our modern world.

Tracing the roots of the sanctity of life doctrine occupy most of Part 1, which is the major portion of his book. He deals in turn with the Bible, church documents and theologians from the first through the sixteenth centuries, practices related to life and death decision making in the early centuries, and finally with other possible sources of the sanctity of life ethic. In Part 2, Drutchas looks at the writing of more recent philosophers, ethicists and theologians, and ends the book with a final critique and proposal of his alternative.

Drutchas sets off in the wrong direction from the beginning by seeking a "doctrine" of the sanctity of life. That is because "sanctity of life" is not a doctrine; it is an ethic. The author finds no uniform expression of a sanctity of life "doctrine," and no use of the terminology in early church history. He attributes the origin of the term "sanctity of life" to historian William E.H. Lecky who described what he saw as the fruit of Christian doctrine and belief. Lecky, the secular historian, expressed the relationship between doctrine and ethic which Drutchas misses. An ethic applies a doctrine to a code of behavior or action. For that reason, it will not be expressed in the same way in different eras. An ethic will draw on the various doctrines of Christian faith to

respond to the challenges that are dominant in its own period of history. For example, because individualism expressed in terms of a radical autonomy is a characteristic of modern American culture, expressing the biblical ethic on life must draw on the doctrines of Christian faith that address that particular issue. Drutchas is looking for something like a creedal statement repeated over the centuries. He does not find it because the nature of an ethic is to apply timeless truths to changing conditions.

Consequently, it is no surprise that Drutchas's method finds no support for the sanctity of human life in the history of the church. But his search for a doctrine is not the only difficulty with this book. He also misconstrues the theology of the historical church which, he says, was more interested in eternal than in earthly life. Christians historically saw the body only as a means to an end: "Christian anthropologies were never traditionally disposed to put much stock in the value of physical human life." The body was a burden.

Drutchas acknowledges opposition to abortion in the church's history, but explains it away by charging that it was not really abortion that the early church opposed; rather, the church's motivation was the exposure of sexual sin. He goes so far as to assert that the Catholic Church today would condemn abortion even if it could be proved that the fetus is not a human being. That is because the church, he says, is not interested in protecting what is in the womb--it is interested in punishing sexual sin. Confusing suicide with martyrdom, he says, "Certainly, prominent church leaders gave their outright sanction and blessing to suicide." Their apparent opposition to suicide was only because new converts were killing themselves to keep from sinning.

The facts of history, however, do not line up with these assertions of Drutchas's. Michael M. Uhlmann, in his chapter of the book *Last Rites: Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide Debated* writes that "Even Auguste Comte, that rigorously atheistic father of modern positivism, recognized Christianity's prohibition of suicide as one of its singular contributions to civilization." Michael J. Gorman, in *Abortion and the Early Church* writes that early church documents discuss abortion in the context of the biblical admonition to "love your neighbor as yourself." Later in the second century, Athenagoras declared the fetus an "object of God's care," and Clement of Alexandria described the unborn as a design of providence. The evidence of the writings themselves is concern for the value of the life of the unborn, not for sexual sin.

Drutchas's method of inquiry finds concerns about life unimportant in the early church while Gorman quotes from document after document which uphold the value of innocent human life, propound a sanctity of life ethic, and explicitly oppose abortion. When he

gets to the period of the Reformation, Drutchas finds no expression of the sanctity of life in Martin Luther's writings, but he doesn't mention that Luther wrote in defense of the unborn and opposed abortion.

One of the more surprising of Drutchas' assertions is his portrayal of the abandonment of infants as compassionate. Using John Boswell as his authority, he says that the pagan Roman practice was the accepted process of adoption. "Making use of designated locales for exposure and abandonment, they counted on the adoption of their biological offspring by strangers." Christians, he says, did ill by interfering to stop the practice.

Drutchas finds historic Christian doctrines problematic for a reasonable approach to decision making. He agrees with ethicist Daniel Callahan who regards all moral rules as human artifacts and who believes that with the technological developments of modern life, we cannot afford to draw on the past for our ethical standards. Drutchas finds that the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God reduces human beings to "chattel" and "property." He quotes gnostic author Elaine Pagels who sees the departure from Eden after the Fall in Genesis as a positive parable "about how men and women acquired their personal freedom in relationship to God."

In the face of Christian belief that God became flesh and rose bodily, he argues that the Bible and the church historically disdained the body and focused on the state of the soul. Again repeating gnostic heresy he asserts that Paul, like Jesus, "saw little value in either sex or procreation." From absence of a direct prohibition against suicide and abortion, he argues the Bible's unconcern about these practices. But the suicides recorded in Scripture are by men overtaken by hopeless remorse for their sin: King Saul and Judas Iscariot are not models of godliness either in how they lived or died.

When Drutchas finally offers his proposal for an alternative to the sanctity of life ethic, readers who have waited for something more consonant with Christian faith will be disappointed. A mark of this author's approach to the morality of killing is the absence of any discussion of right and wrong. He makes it very clear in the final chapters that his approach is pragmatic: he is interested in what works. This turns out to be a relative value for life that allows people to make judgments about what is in the best interest of themselves and other human beings.

In the end, what Drutchas calls the sanctity of life is no more than a straw man. Modern culture has experienced dramatic changes that affect life and death decisions. What the church should teach and how Christians should respond to these changes are central questions of how Christian faith ought to be applied today. There are better resources than Drutchas's book from which to draw in the rich tradition of Christian theology and plentiful contemporary works.

